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ISSUE 154 OCTOBER 2014

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The Gears of War developer returns, now at the head of his own studio: Boss Key Productions. We caught up with the famed dev to find out more about his next venture and new IP, *BlueStreak*

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EDITORIAL

SANITY CHEQUE

LET'S PUT ASIDE the quite obvious monetary appeal of selling your studio – regardless of what has been said about Markus Persson on the ever-hostile internet, no one turns down $2.5bn.

Instead, let's take a look at Notch's publicly-stated reasons for handing over *Minecraft* and Mojang to Microsoft. The main reason was not the money, but his sanity – and it's a fair point. Going from being a lone developer with a cool idea to the man held responsible for a worldwide phenomenon is more than just a culture shock – it requires a complete change in your attitude towards your business.

As Facepunch's Garry Newman observed, Notch could no longer focus just on his games; he was responsible for his employees and, by extension, their families. There are so many indies out there trying to make the Next Big Thing, but if they to succeed, are they prepared for the responsibilities that come with it? Notch himself admitted: "I'm not an entrepreneur. I'm not a CEO. I'm a nerdy computer programmer who likes to have opinions on Twitter."

Many one-man success stories like Mike Bithell and Simon Roth are now recruiting their own teams or even opening studios. While it doesn't mean giving up the creative freedom that gets most developers out of bed in the morning, it does require balance with other, more practical responsibilities.

Even triple-A developers like Cliff Bleszinski must learn the ways of business as they head up their own studios – you can read the *Gears of War* designer's thoughts on this on p11.

The bottom line: devs should keep reaching for the stars – just keep in mind how you'll fund the rocket fuel that will keep you up there.

James Batchelor
james.batchelor@intentmedia.co.uk

Apple Watch: The developer reaction

With Apple entering the smartwatch space, many developers are looking to the opportunities ahead

by Will Freeman

DEVELOPERS HAVE MOVED to show careful optimism about the Apple Watch's potential for games in the wake of the much-anticipated wearable's reveal.

The smartwatch debuted at Apple's September press conference, making Apple something of a latecomer to the wearables space, where the likes of Samsung, Motorola, Sony and Pebble are already active in the market.

Sporting a diminutive front touchscreen display, 'Crown' dial and button that apes the form of traditional watch winders, heart rate monitor, microphone, and accelerometers, the Apple Watch offers both opportunities and challenges to developers, who are to be supported with the WatchKit, providing all the tools and APIs they need for the platform.

BIG POTENTIAL?

All of these features has developers that are already active in the iOS space feeling optimistic about the potential for games.

"I'm very excited about the Apple Watch," offered Markus Pasula, CEO and co-founder of *Supernauts* studio Grand Cru.

"Players can be even more connected to mobile games that are truly social, with new kind of very fast and simple interactions.

"Taken further, I believe it can even enable new kinds of social gameplay mechanics. Smartphones are already always with you, but the smartwatch is even closer. When your friend does an action in a game, you can respond faster through your Apple Watch."

> ***"We can't just take existing mechanics to a new platform. We must think about what the device has that nothing else does."***
>
> Dan Gray, UsTwo

The potential for social interaction is something Apple has put at the forefront of much of the design of the watch, as gameplay and UI designers begin to consider the reality of 'glanceable' design, serving players who will take fleeting looks at the screen of a watch.

The Apple Watch – which also provides haptic feedback to users through soft vibrations targeted at the wrist – effectively provides an extension to the iPhone, a link that remains essential to making use of the wearable.

As such, many developers are beginning to consider the challenge and opportunity of crafting a new school of game design around small screens.

"One thing we'll be sure to do is think outside of the obvious," explained Dan Gray, executive producer on UsTwo's critically celebrated tablet-focused puzzler *Monument Valley*.

"It isn't a case of finding ways to take existing mechanics to a new platform. We have to think about what properties and capabilities the device has that nothing else does. Then design around these so that the negatives are nullified."

DEVELOPMENT SMARTS

The challenge will be a significant one, and as such some are predicting that it will take some time for even the most experienced developers

// MEANWHILE ON DEVELOP-ONLINE.NET

How Valve hopes to improve discoverability on Steam
http://deve1op.net/1uTlCO9

Mobile devs 'shouldn't expect customers to find games on their own'
http://deve1op.net/1r3L3dy

develop iPad

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> ***"There's lots of creative applications in games. Lots of people will get it wrong for a long while, just as they did in mobile."***
>
> Will Luton, designer

to make the most of the new Apple Watch.

"I think it's going to take a lot of people by surprise," said Will Luton, designer of current Pebble exclusive *Pixel Miner*.

"As an early adopter with the Pebble, I was impressed with the scope of such a device just by living with it. I can see lots of creative application in games.

"However, lots of people will get it wrong for a long while. Just as they did in mobile. The tendency will be to consider it a smaller phone, but the patterns of usage and control paradigms will be so different that the majority of mobile titles won't make for good experiences."

Ed Rumley, general manager at Chillingo, recognised the effort needed to adapt game design conventions for smart watches, adding: "We're very excited about the Apple Watch and are working closely with our indie developers to examine the best ways to leverage its features.

"The wearable experience is still in its early days but it has vast potential in expanding how players interact with their games and mobile devices."

A NEW WAY TO PLAY

In spite of modest caution around crafting a new grammar of design for wearables, however, most agree the opportunity is significant, opening the doors to many new types of interaction and game experience.

"The most obvious of these benefits is accessibility," stated UsTwo's Gray. "Being able to interact with a player without the hassle of pulling a device out of their pocket is a powerful thing, and can lead to a more sustained and thus personal experience.

"The most obvious and easy to implement example of this will be notifications for free-to-play games; those timer designers will be sat with a bit smile on their face right now."

WATCH THIS SPACE

There is also much optimism around the Apple Watch's potential to further spread games to the mass consumer market, just as the iPhone did after its 2007 launch.

"There's a clear pattern in place if you take the long view," said Ben Cousins, consultant and former developer.

"Computing platforms are getting smaller, simpler to use, and more intimate or accessible physically, and each of these improvements makes games more mainstream, and grows the market in the process. Smartwatches fit perfectly into this trend."

Cousins continued by explaining that while the Apple Watch presents developers with many obstacles through the likes of its screen size, there is every chance it could thrive.

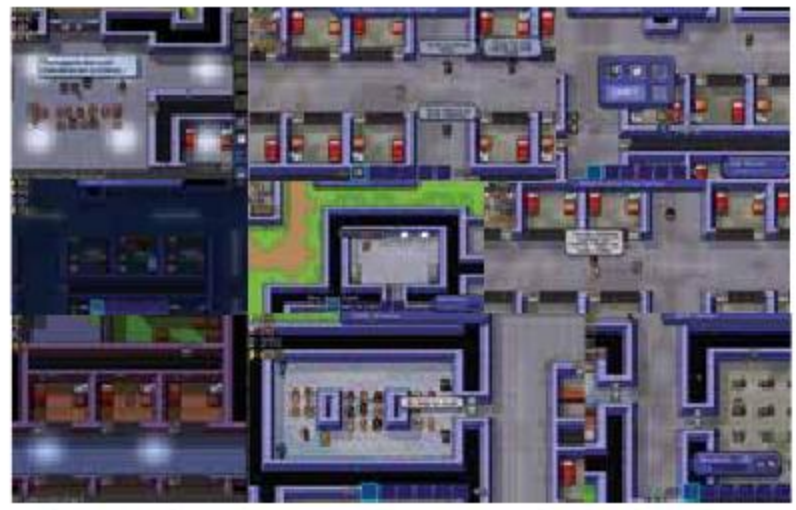
"We have a clear example in recent history – the smartphone – of a device class with precisely those same 'restrictions', which ended up being the biggest games platform of all time."

The Apple Watch is due for release in 2015, and will be priced from US$349. ■

A break for success

Chris Davis tells **Develop** about the rise of Mouldy Toof, which won a UKIE award at Gamescom, and almost stole the Microsoft conference

by Will Freeman



AT MICROSOFT'S GAMESCOM press conference, amidst all the spectacle and showmanship, one game caught many off guard. Press, consumers and attendees of the show alike couldn't help but be captivated by *The Escapists*.

Presented in nostalgic pixel art and crafted by a one-person microstudio in Derby, UK, it etched itself onto the brains of numerous observers.

It wasn't *The Escapists*' true debut – the game is already in Early Access for PC on Steam– but it was the moment it thrust itself into the forefront of the collective gamer conscience. In the preceding days, the game's single Xbox One demo pod at Gamescom also drew an inquisitive crowd.

And as Gamescom's industry element closed, *The Escapists* was awarded the UK Game of the Show accolade by UKIE, fighting off competition from the likes of Playground, Telltale and The Creative Assembly.

"Watching a stream of the show at the time was surreal," says Chris Davis, sole developer at *The Escapists* studio Mouldy Toof, unable to make Gamescom as he was committed to remaining at home polishing his project.

"Seeing that 'little game' you've been working on for months get shown on a live stage in front of the world seemed crazy. And then seeing it featured all over social media and game sites in the days after was a real wake up call."

INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

Mouldy Toof's journey into the spotlight started after it was picked up by veteran UK studio turned indie publisher Team17, as Davis explains.

"That was all thanks to Debbie Bestwick and the rest of Team17. They've been really enthusiastic about the premise and pushing the game out there to the masses. It's quite a unique, interesting concept and I guess Microsoft saw the same sparkle in it that Team17 and others did. It was a very proud moment for all of us to see it on stage at Gamescom."

Mouldy Toof didn't start with *The Escapists,* however. That happened much earlier, when Davis and school friends built card games from paper and pen. That creative drive never faded – by his late teens, the fledgling developer was coding games. Much later one of those projects became *Spud's Quest*, a platform adventure that Davis feels was his first serious video game, and the one that inspired the founding of Mouldy Toof as an operational studio. And as his ambitions grew, an idea from those pen and paper designs continued to play on Davis' mind.

"I always had the desire to do a re-imagining of one of my favourite ZX Spectrum games called *Back to Skool*," he states.

"It was probably the first ever sandbox game that placed you as a school pupil and you had to follow the school routine and mess about. I took the routine-based structure from that and adapted it to a prison setting, adding the much more interesting objective of pulling off an escape."

But what of that award for an in-development UK-made game on show at Gamescom 2014? With a nostalgia for the vintage era of UK coders and platforms like the Spectrum, does Davis actually feel his local development community is something to identify with, or that defines Mouldy Toof?

"I've always had my head in the clouds regarding what goes on in the indie scene around me; never really been involved in any of these meet-ups and such that others get up to," Davis admits.

"So on that front I'm not so sure I can identify with the Brit indie scene, but I do feel that both my games have that 'cheeky chappy' British charm to them that others in the UK will probably connect with."

SPECIAL UK?

And there is something about Mouldy Toof that is evocative of the early days of famed UK development entrepreneurs from the golden era like *Dizzy* creators the Oliver twins.

A Fusion coder who does everything solo, Davis is as humble as he is motivated. With ideas that started in boyhood, he creates character-drenched, simple 2D games with the knack to make their way to greatness, in his case via a platform holder press conference rubbing shoulders with the big league.

It almost sounds like the beginning of a familiar story. ■

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November 13th
London, UK
www.londongamesconference.com

OCTOBER 2014

BRAZIL GAMES SHOW
October 8th to 12th
Sao Paulo, Brazil
www.brasilgameshow.com.br

GAMES FUNDING FORUM
October 23rd
London, UK
www.gamesfundingforum.co.uk

ITALIAN GAME DEVELOPERS SUMMIT
October 24th to 26th
Milan, Italy
www.igds.it

GAMECITY 9
October 25th to November 1st
Nottingham, UK
www.gamecity.org

BACKSPACE FESTIVAL
October 25th to November 2nd
Royal Leamington Spa, UK
www.backspaceuk.com

GAME CONNECTION EUROPE
October 29th to 31st
Paris, France
www.game-connection.com

THE DEVELOP QUIZ
October 30th
Royal Leamington Spa, UK
Jess.Farnan@intentmedia.co.uk

NOVEMBER 2014

APPS WORLD EUROPE
November 12th to 13th
London, UK
www.apps-world.net/europe/

EVENT SPOTLIGHT

GAME CONNECTION

ONE OF THE biggest networking events in the games industry calendar, Game Connection has grown considerably over the years.

For those who have yet to attend, Game Connection is an event that brings together studios and service companies from all over the industry in a venue where they can arrange quick-fire meetings and establish new connections. Sort of like speed dating, but with a better chance of seeing the other party again.

Game Connection is held all over the world, with the European iteration hosted in Paris each year. This year's event will be slightly earlier than usual, taking place at the end of October to coincide with Paris Games Week.

As well as networking, the event also offers a three-day multi-track conference, which also incorporates a number of Game Connection's awards ceremonies, including the revamped development awards previoulsy known as Selected Projects.

You can find out more at **www.game-connection.com**, where you can also use the app and website to arrange and keep track of your meeting schedule.

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- Start-up special: How to open a studio
- Game services providers
- Guide: User interface tools

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DEC 2014/JAN 2015

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- Immigration & Law
- Multi-site development: Making games with teams around the world

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AT A GLANCE

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Celebrate the series' handheld debut by beating the crap out of Pikachu.

OCTOBER 5TH TO 11TH
Nuclear Medicine Week
It's a fairly safe bet this isn't as cool or dangerous as it sounds.

OCTOBER 7TH
Alien: Isolation
In space no one can hear your scream. They can in your lounge, so be brave.

OCTOBER 25TH
GameCity 9
The popular festival returns, this time with a Robin Hood treasure hunt.

OCTOBER 30TH
The Develop Quiz
Hope you've been studying hard, Leamington – we're coming for you…

OCTOBER 31ST
Halloween
Don't pretend you're too grown up for this. No one turns down free sweets.

Variable declarations

//COMMENT: BUSINESS

VR's commercial rift

Nick Gibson discusses how Oculus VR can realise its potential as a profitable device

Nick Gibson says Oculus' USP could ultimately be setting up a 'Steam for VR' platform with its own exclusive software

THE AGE OF virtual reality is upon us. Well, Facebook evidently believes that after spending $2bn acquiring Oculus VR. It has generated a level of frothy excitement not seen since some of the early console launches, triggering widespread debate over whether it represents the future of gaming – with one leading industry figure suggesting it will be bigger than smartphones – or just another fad.

Rather than wandering down this well-trod path, let's explore a different angle on Oculus: its commercial opportunity and how Facebook might, or might not, generate a return on its sizeable investment.

When Facebook bought the VR start-up, it purchased a company that was effectively at a pre-revenue stage. Kickstarter pledges and direct dev kit sales do not provide a direct correlation to consumer interest, as Ouya has amply proven. However, what is even more unusual for a transaction of this magnitude is that Oculus has yet to establish its primary revenue model.

Where Sony will be able to drop Morpheus quite easily into its existing commercial and technical ecosystem, Oculus does not own the underlying platforms, PC and Mac. It does not have an existing games licensing business it can extend to support virtual reality, nor does it have any existing games hardware on the market whose sales could be significantly bolstered by the launch of a VR headset peripheral.

Oculus has talked about multiple potential models: mark-ups on consumer hardware sales, development kit sales, licence fees and operating a software marketplace. The company intends to use Facebook's financial resources to sell the hardware at cost, at the outset at least.

> ***"The $2bn Facebook has spent looks like being the start of what is significantly more expensive journey."***

This effectively leaves charging content creators and hardware partners either directly via up-front licence fees or indirectly via a share of consumer sales. The former is simply not going to generate $2bn in value but the latter might – in particular via content sales. To achieve this, Oculus could turn its Share distribution platform into an iTunes-like discovery and sales platform for Rift headset owners, but this strategy faces multiple hurdles.

RIVAL RIFTS

Oculus may be the only major player in the PC virtual reality market at present, but any material consumer uptake of the Rift will undoubtedly trigger more market entrants.

In fact, it is easy to see the VR headset market eventually becoming commoditised, incorporating a broad range of form factors and performance differences, much like monitors. This may even suit Oculus, which could license its platform, as it has for Samsung's Gear VR.

The problem here is that the PC market has a long history of undermining proprietary standards via the creation of open ones and it is feasible that third-party VR hardware and software may have to fragment further to support multiple standards and maximise their market reach.

As yet, there are no barriers to developers distributing and selling their Rift-compatible software directly to consumers or via third parties. Many have already begun to do this through Steam, their own websites and a growing number of specialist Rift sites. Some sites have even begun to build their own commercial market places with the intention to sell Rift software direct to consumers.

STEAM FOR VR

With support for the Rift ranging from basic compatibility through to made-for-Rift software, Oculus cannot simply implement restrictions for the consumer version forcing developers to sell through its own marketplace. Instead it will need to become a 'Steam for VR' platform, building a consumer community and up-selling Rift software to them.

Mandatory exclusivity will have to be confined to its own software and this may well be the only significant USP that Oculus ends up with. It appears to recognise this and is known to be developing games internally.

Much like Oculus's commercial model, the rationale for Facebook's purchase of Oculus is still hazy, although its interest is clearly long-term and primarily outside of games. It has mentioned VR's potential use with social interaction, education, medicine and other forms of entertainmen. At present, Facebook is in only one of these markets and entering the others represents a gargantuan challenge.

Add to this the likelihood of increasing competition and, again, the importance of content exclusivity and it is clear that the $2bn Facebook has already spent so far looks like being the start of what is likely to be a significantly more expensive journey. ■

Nick Gibson is a director at Games Investor Consulting, which provides commercial check-ups, strategy and data to games, media and finance companies.
www.gamesinvestor.com

//COMMENT: DESIGN

Open worlds: here comes a new challenger

Alex Ward ponders whether Ubisoft has Rockstar on the run

I'M A HUGE fan of open world games. I fell in love with them playing Neversoft's *Gun* and Pandemic's *Mercenaries* on the original Xbox. Both *Crackdown* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* were both massively influential to me over the past six or so years. I like games that take their time and that allow players to take their time within them.

Up until last year, if you'd asked me who makes the best open world games in the business, I'd only have one answer: Rockstar. But over the past 12 months, I've come to realise that maybe there's a new king in the open world kingdom – and that is Ubisoft.

The Paris-based 'Editorial' group know that there are big numbers to found in big open world epics. And they've been building their arsenal steadily over the past few years.

I thought this year's E3 was one of the most interesting in recent years. It really showed who the winners are right now, and clearly highlighted the losers. Ubisoft showed that they seem to have mastered the technical, logistical and challenging content creation hurdles necessary to making some of the best games in the business right now.

THE WORLDS OF UBISOFT

I spent most of last November exploring *Far Cry 3*. I spent hour after hour in the brilliant sunshine of that game, uncovering all of its secrets and completing all of its objectives.

And I've had an unforgettable time exploring the dark underbelly of Chicago in *Watch Dogs*. My experiences with those titles have primed me for the new *Assassin's Creed*. It's very rare that a publisher can inspire such brand loyalty and deliver such consistency.

What's even more incredible is the amount of game systems that are shared across all three franchises. If you liked unlocking viewpoints in *Assassin's Creed*, then you'll understand how radio towers in *Far Cry* or ctOS towers in *Watch Dogs* provide objectives. These features are consistently improved upon with each game – and it's foundations like these which lead me to suggest that the guys in Paris might have Rockstar on the run.

GTA does what it does very well, but those lush PS4 visuals aside, it is starting creak around the edges when it comes to introducing new gameplay.

The first heist in *GTA V* evoked moments of the Wall Street escape sequence from *The Dark Knight Rises*. I loved this sequence, but it was scripted so that all players arrive at the same place. Ubisoft would have made this more like a base and given the player the freedom to try and approach, rob and escape. If you're played through all of the criminal convoys in *Watch Dogs* then I'm sure that, like me, you've been thinking of how much better *GTA* will be if the AI was stronger and each mission allowed total freedom.

Ubisoft is not just demonstrating mastery of single-player open world games, they are now branching out into co-operative play.

Microsoft led the way in encouraging developers to embrace online co-op by providing the solid backbone of Xbox Live. Some of my favourite game sessions ever co-op sessions in *Crackdown* and *Halo Reach* – and I've always been motivated to focus on shared online experiences as a result of these epic sessions.

But I'm sure the guys in Edinburgh and New York City are watching Ubisoft closely and maybe healthy competition will spur them on to further innovate and entertain us. Also, Trevor for president! ■

Alex Ward believes Ubisoft has mastered the art of creating expansive open word game experiences with emergent gameplay (Image: Dead End Thrills)

Alex Ward is the co-founder of Three Fields Entertainment. He previously co-founded *Burnout* developer Criterion Games.
www.threefieldsentertainment.com

//EXTRA CONTENT ONLINE

"I think the rogue-like game design model has huge potential to disrupt the current market of free-to-play copycats."

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Oscar Clark, Unity
deve1op.net/1qlL3ku

"Analytics should be built into your marketing strategy in order to correctly analyse and know the essentials of your product."

The metrics that matter
Oren Todoros, Plarium
deve1op.net/1ozKMAf

"It's misleading to take one specific element from any media, let alone just games, and present it in isolation without any context."

Normalising the diversity debate
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We speak to the studios on why contract work doesn't mean a loss of creativity
P14

REGION FOCUS: ITALY
A look at why the government is taking an interest in this dev hub
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30 YEARS OF REFLECTIONS:
How the long-standing developer has changed, and what it's up to now
P31

Bleszinski unchained

Having left the games industry at the end of 2012, Cliff Bleszinski is back and at the head of his own studio. **Alex Calvin** speaks to the famous developer about his return, the free-to-play model and why being transparent about the development of Boss Key's debut title, PC arena shooter BlueStreak, is so important

CLIFF BLESZINSKI IS one of the most famous games developers in the industry, best known for creating the leading *Gears of War* franchise, which has been sold on to Microsoft since his departure from Epic in 2012.

Following a lengthy hiatus, Bleszinski is back with Boss Key, his new development studio and his first gaming venture since his depature. Shortly after it opened its doors, his North Carolina-based business revealed it is working on a free-to-play arena shooter *BlueStreak*. But things at Boss Key are different to what the famous developer has dealt with before.

"This is my first time being CEO and I'm learning a lot," he tells *Develop*.

"Having to walk that line being the CEO and being the main creative at your studio, versus getting along with people and knowing when to be the boss is a line I am still learning.

"A lot of it reminds me of any personal relation where you pick your battles. You don't micro-manage, you hire people to do their job. When something isn't going right you poke in, but other than that, by not micro-managing everybody, I can find the time to spend cycles on environments, the IP and what the game mechanics are going to be. If I don't I go crazy, by the way."

RETURN TO FORM

But his long career in the games industry and the critical praise he has garnered over the years hasn't made him complacent, the developer insists. Rather, he is determined the re-earn the trust of his audience.

"You're only as good as your last game," he says. "The last game that I shipped that I was directly involved in creating was *Gears of War 3*. I provided feedback for *Judgment*, but that was its own thing.

> ***"I'm not resting on my 20 years of experience laurels. I'm going to re-prove myself."***
>
> Cliff Bleszinski, Boss Key

"It's one of those things, a combination of being brutally honest to a fault over social media. There are some users I might have alienated when I try and remind them that this is a business, which I want to make a fantastic game first and foremost, but it will have to make money. I have to have money to keep the lights on in the studio and give bonuses at some point.

He adds: "I'm not resting on my 20 years of experience laurels. I'm going to re-prove myself. The world moves fast. Today's YouTube celebrity is tomorrow's has-been. That's the world we live in. It doesn't matter if in technology you have 20 years of experience, – it only matters if you look forward."

FREE REIGN

Working at Boss Key is a very different experience for Bleszinski. While his former employer Epic Games woke up to the idea of open development with Unreal Engine 4, this time he is free from the off to make his game as he sees fit – and he's chosen to do it publicly.

"One of the things I want to try as we get the game up and running is be transparent and get user buy-in as soon as possible," Bleszinski says.

"The old way of keeping it completely secret is not for me anymore. My former employer really woke up to the right way with weekly live-streams and showing white-box maps and things like that.

"The thing that they have to deal with that I luckily don't have to is the shooter conundrum: the inventor's dilemma where if they change it lots or don't change it enough they get people annoyed. I'm starting with a new IP. Any weapon idea, any movement idea, any environment idea that anyone at the studio has is fair game.

"And that's incredibly exciting turf, and it's something that I haven't had the chance to do that since *Gears of War* in 2005. I'm back at the helm where I have my baby again.

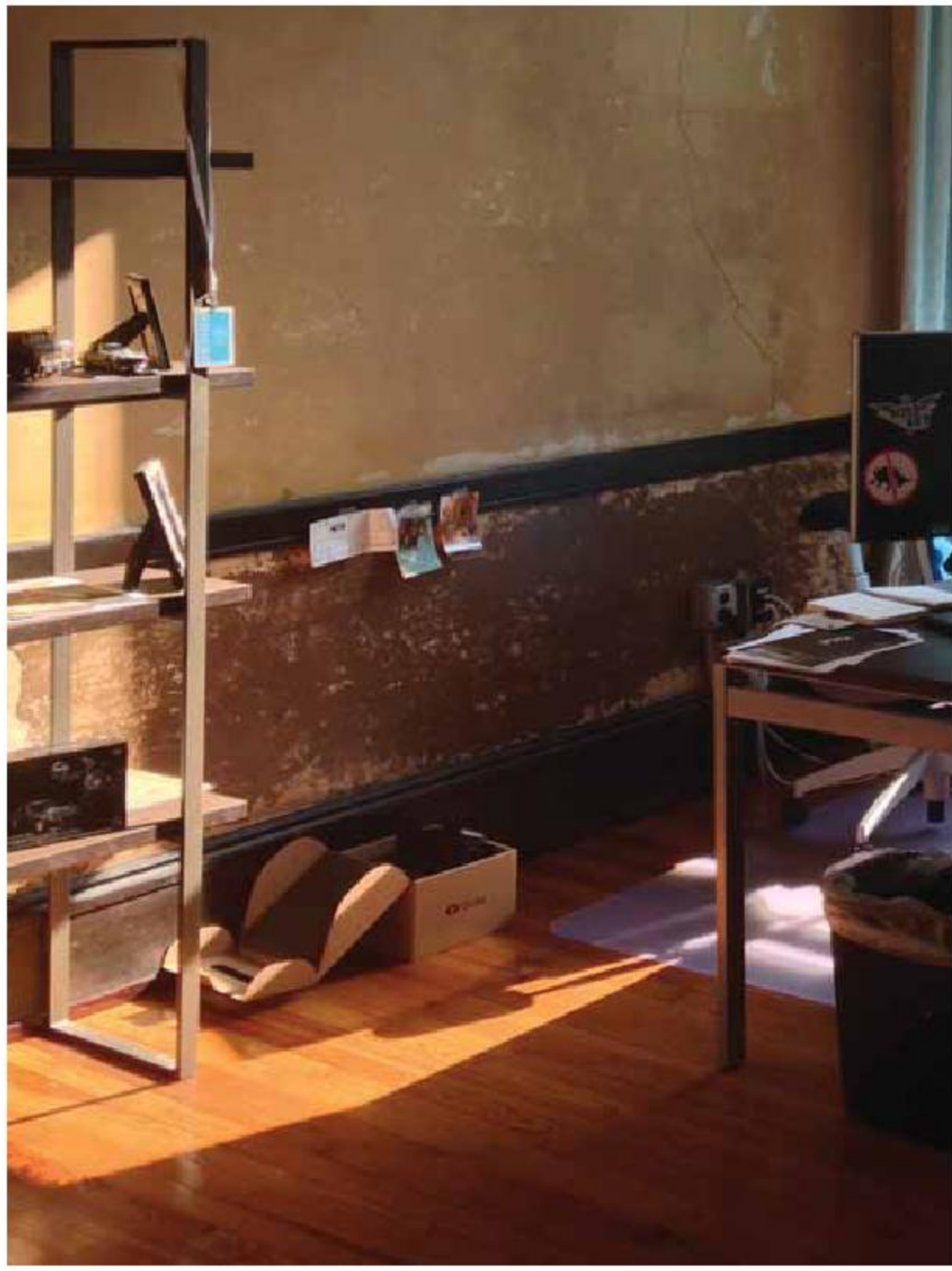
"We're trying to figure out how to reveal the pillars of the game. Maybe we'll do it with the press initially, then go for a deeper dive with weekly podcasts and talk about the features. It's still a little early to go into specifics, but there are plenty of things that can be done in the FPS space. One of my main inspirations is looking to platform games and the bullet-hell shooters that we all played growing up."

WINNING STREAK

Boss Key's first game, *BlueStreak,* is a free-to-play title – a business model that continues to divide the games industry. Bleszinski himself insists that in the game, the model isn't going to infringe into the enjoyability of the title.

"People like to talk about the *DOTA* way, where they try to monetise with hats and cosmetic stuff," he explains.

"The things that people forget is that the game already has the built-in ecosystem that is Steam, which can cross-promote the game to other titles. They don't really have to do a pay for variety of pay-to-win. From talking to the fans, they hate to pay to win. But they think that *League of Legends* is a little bit pay-to-win. I haven't played Riot's game enough to make a proper commentary on what's best for them, but clearly what it is is working.



"I'm hoping to have a hybrid to pay for a bit of variety with a heavy leaning on cosmetics. If you have the community in place, even if you just have a small number of people actually giving money to the game, people suddenly start caring about the appearance of their avatar more than they normally would."

Bleszinski goes on to say there are a variety of methods to tackle monetisation, but admits he is new to the world of free-to-play, having previously worked in the premium triple-A space at Epic, and is starting from scratch with *BlueStreak*.

"Thankfully I have a partner in *BlueStreak*'s publisher Nexon, which has done a variety of free-to-play games," he says. "They are determined to make a great game that builds a community first and foremost and then figures out how to make players throw

money at the game after, as opposed to digging into their pockets from the start."

BEING OPEN

It's clear that Bleszinski cares about what his fans think of him and his games, and enjoys being open with them over social media, and this is forming an integral part of the development of *BlueStreak*.

"We're trying to figure out how to reveal the core pillars of the game right now," he says. "The way games development works is that you go in a certain direction and think you are making a certain game.

"I call it the potato chip accident, where a lady invented chips by accident. That can happen in games development. You are designing a title with certain pillars in mind, and then you find out that pillar one is terrible, but pillar two is a great idea, once it's modded with pillar three. The game ends up being a mix of two and three, and one and four drop off.

"By being transparent to the users, if you're not smart about it, you might look like you have no idea what you are doing. Nobody in this industry knows what they're doing – we just have a gut assumption based on the games that we can play in our head and sometimes you get it on screen and it's fun, and sometimes it's not. Sometimes variables pop up that you hadn't even considered you'd have to work around. The thing is you pan for gold, you chip away at the marble and hopefully make a sculpture if you don't knock the nose off."

One way that the team has been open is telling fans about who has been hired, publicising this information over sites such as Twitter to ensure the developers behind the game are known and receive recognition.

"When you hire someone you are raising their professional stock as a developer," he says. "You know who they are. You only seem to learn someone's name when they have left the company," he says.

"Recently there was Dan Adelman, who was responsible for Nintendo's indie outreach. He did a lot of great things, and I was wondering why I had only heard about this person once they left. For me it comes down to confidence. I want people to come to see the culture, to see the offices and see the game I'm building and be excited to come work at the studio with people who are passionate about what they do and aren't working on the assembly line of standard console triple-A development these days.

CONSOLE YOURSELF

BLUESTREAK IS BEING developed for PC right now, but Boss Key CEO Cliff Bleszinski says he'd be silly to dismiss the possibility of the title coming to console in the future.

"Most of my fanbase is in their 20s and grew up playing *Gears of War*, and they've not familiar with *Jazz Jackrabbit* and *Unreal Tournament*," he tells *Develop*.

"People think because we are developing PC-first, that rules out consoles – that's absolutely not the case. If we get to the point where we have a great game and a great community, I'd love to be on Xbox One and PlayStation 4.

"That's a couple of years out though. I want to build on PC because I believe that's where the community gathers, where I think the most high-end experience is. That variety comes with things that are a pain in the butt, like getting your system configured, but the user will push through and will get the game to run. They'll crowdsource finding out what the issues are with people's video cards and they'll make mods for a game that make it look better than you ever thought it could.

"Do I not like Sony or Microsoft? Not at all. Right now I think there's a lot of fantastic reasons to play my consoles, but we're a small studio so if we ever reached that point, we'd have to find someone to contact to do it as a partner with us."

"The identities of our people can be made public, we put their photos up on the website. You can't ruin a good marriage that's on the way out. If they're unhappy, they're going to leave, if they're happy they'll stay and we'll all make a better product for it."

THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Recently, Boss Key has made a number of high-profile hires. If you turn to our Develop Jobs section this month (*pg. 35*), there are ten industry veterans who have been recruited.

"We have multiple pillars for the studio for its philosophies," Bleszinski explains. "One is no bullshit, and I tell people that if that upsets you then the studio isn't going to be a good fit for you.

"It's not about having some *Lord of the Flies* mentality, it's about people who have been to corporate companies, who have been middle management, where they can't do the right thing for the game. People I've talked to who have worked on a game that has a patch in progress and aren't allowed to post in the forums to let them know that is coming to make them feel better.

"I spoke to the main designer in a high-profile game at E3 who told me that he's not allowed to have Twitter. That's where my no bullshit mantra comes from. One of the other pillars is old bones and fresh blood. Hiring people that are not experienced, who are not jaded, is one of the goals. One of the people we are thinking about hiring right now is a level designer who has no professional experience in the industry outside of making fantastic *Team Fortress 2* maps. Those were actually picked up by Valve."

Bleszinski concludes that it's these fresh young hires that also give the old guard a new sense of inspiration, fuelling creativity amongst all employees at the studio who feed off each other's energy.

"That's one of the studio's goals," he says. "Get people who are experienced, people who worked on *Call of Duty 12* or *Assassin's Creed 8*. They want to work in a studio that is a medium size where they think they can make a difference creatively." ■

Main: Bleszinski's new studio Boss Key started small but has been on a fierce recruitment drive to bring in major talent for the development of its first new IP, BlueStreak

Far left: Despite Gears of War's ongoing popularity, Bleszinski insists he is not resting on his laurels and is determined to prove himself all over again

Guns **for hire**

Industry shifts have had a major effect on all areas of the sector, but what about those in the work-for-hire space? **Craig Chapple** asks the leading studios why working on existing IP can be good for business and creativity

Top to bottom: Marmalade's Mike Burnham and Strawdog's Paul Smith

THE WORK-FOR-HIRE SECTOR, particularly in the UK, has gone under a few changes in recent years as studios have had to adapt to client demands.

Though Disney has contracted the likes of Studio Gobo and Ninja Theory to work on *Disney Infinity*, other businesses such as Capcom have begun moving work in-house.

And the work-for-hire industry has always been a challenging one, where a contract cancellation at the last minute could mean the death of company or result in significant job losses.

Leamington Spa outfit Blitz, whose last projects included *Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two*, closed in September last year. Co-founder Philip Oliver said at the time many major clients have felt unable to invest in significant projects, while other clients had changed strategies.

Another studio, Eurocom, known for its James Bond titles, closed as Activision began withdrawing from the licenced games business and the studio suffered from contract delays. The closure affected some 200 staff.

> ***"The traditional publisher and financier is increasingly being removed from the process."***
>
> Paul Smith, Strawdog Studios

WORK SEEKERS

Firebrand CEO Mark Greenshields says that during the last few years, as the above closures show, the market for work-for-hire has shrunk considerably, though things are looking up for the sector.

"Since 2011, however, the market has seen the largest change pretty much since it started," he says. "The WFH marker basically vanished close to overnight for all but utter bottom dollar work. It is recovering slowly but much, much smaller than before and with a considerable amount of low-cost teams overseas bidding.

"F2P has left publishers with no idea what budget to spend so they squeeze more than before. As most budgets were created by finance based on projections from sales and marketing, and it is hard to budget when you basically have no idea what you will make."

Paul Smith, MD of *Peppa Pig* games developer Strawdog Studios, says the fundamental principle behind work-for-hire hasn't changed. Clients are still seeking the best service provider to deliver the best possible product on budget and on time.

He admits, however, that the digital space has sparked some changes in the sector.

"The nature of digital product and its relative ease of development and distribution, especially in the mobile space, mean clients can have a more cautious

strategy by commissioning minimum viable products which do add an element of uncertainty to the development process," says Smith.

"We mitigate this risk by taking a more agile approach to development which means we're now more geared to react to rapid change with a small core team which is bolstered by a group of trusted contractors. We've worked on several products which have been big and not made it to market, it means as a developer you must remain flexible and be prepare for changes."

One of the ways Strawdog has remained flexible is by finding work from non-traditional routes, such as marketing and advertising agencies. One of its projects for iOS and Android, *Play2Fame*, is being directly financed by a professional footballer.

"The traditional publisher/financier is increasingly being removed from the process and we're now liaising directly with IP owners," explains Smith.

Top to bottom: Aardman's Lorna Probert, Climax's Simon Gardner and Firebrand Games' Mark Greenshields

BUILDING BIG BUSINESS

It may sound like the work-for-hire business is struggling, but many companies are still finding avenues both old and new into the market, and much of it is down to building up a strong reputation over time.

Take Sumo Digital, for instance; known for its work on *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, the team recently announced it was developing the Xbox 360 version of *Forza Horizon 2* and has also taken the reigns on PS4 title *LittleBigPlanet 3*, one of Sony's key franchises (*see pg.20 for more details*). Climax, meanwhile, is working on numerous projects, including a VR title in collaboration with Oculus for the Samsung Gear VR.

Sumo CEO Carl Cavers says a focus on creativity has been central to building its business, which has seen the company expand to over 200 staff since it was founded 11 years ago.

"A key pillar of the company is security, making sure we look after the best interests of everyone involved; providing a quality, collaborative service and product for our clients, as well the security for the staff so they can pay their mortgages at the end of the month," he says. "That, and free pop."

Lorna Probert, head of digital production at one of the UK's most famous work-for-hire companies, Aardman Animations, says that to build a successful business, it is important to recognise your unique selling points and focus on those, or face a failing business further down the line.

"Obviously you have to take risks if you're going to grow but you should do this carefully," states Probert.

"Think about whether you will have enough work to keep new staff busy six months down the line. Choose the technologies you train people up in according to which will best service those USPs. Recognise that new business is a long hard and unpredictable slog. New relationships take time to turn into new jobs so you have to plan ahead. However busy you are you always have to be thinking of where the next job might come from and trying to juggle the pitches alongside the production.

"Your reputation is what keeps the work coming in so value it. This means looking after your clients, delivering on your promises – that means not making unrealistic promises in the first place – and creating high quality content that you can be proud of."

> ***"However busy you are, you always have to think of where the next job might come from."***
>
> Lorna Probert, Aardman

Climax CEO Simon Gardner says its strategy has always been to have one large project and two smaller ones in development, with a fourth team finishing or starting the next project. He explains that this approach ensures a cancellation or failure to pass a green light won't kill the studio.

"That in itself can be a major USP for your company and make you more attractive to a potential client. We've seen a lot of studios rise up and launch one title only to go bust when they finish it," he says.

"Their whole focus is on that one project and they don't find the time or resources to properly line up the follow-on work. Getting contracts, and funding these days, is a full-time job that involves massive time, effort and resources."

PREDICTING THE FUTURE

The work-for-hire space is riddled with challenges, though persistent companies who carefully monitor their business can be hugely successful, as long as they keep aware of the challenges.

Probert says it's important for studios to keep an eye on the latest trends to ensure they have applicable skills for projects. She says that, in many cases, work-for-hire firms often have to predict where the future of the industry may lie so as not to get caught out.

"This means constantly learning and trying new things which can be costly and ultimately leads to a greater degree of risk on your projects," she says.

Sumo studio director Paul Porter believes there is a constant balance to try and position a studio where you can pick and choose the opportunities that best match the skills and experience your company has available.

"Once you are working on a game, ensuring that you create a quality and competitive experience within the constraints that work-for-hire development puts upon you is not always easy," he says. "Given the games that we have been working on recently and are continuing with, we must be doing something right."

Gardner, meanwhile, explains that it's important to have a good technical spread to tackle whatever opportunities arise. The Portsmouth-based company, for example, has staff that can work with engines such as Unity and Unreal Engine 4, as well as with in-house engines at companies such as Sony London Studios' Wonderbook tech, Codemasters' Ego Engine and MercurySteam's *Castlevania* engine.

"This comes from years of experience, but has allowed us to work on many titles that might have been difficult for other studios," he says.

Jamie Campbell, co-founder at IT company d3t, which has worked on titles including *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *Chimpact*, says the main challenge for their business is the work itself, but experience in the field can help.

"Although we don't develop our own IP at d3t, our experience in production and our relationships with on and offshore art outsourcing companies means we're an ideal partner for IP reboots and full game development," he says. "We have experience with games such as Sony Computer Entertainment's *Lemmings Touch* for PS Vita, and Sega's *Warhammer 40,000: Kill Team* on Steam for our friends at Nomad Games."

Another potentially significant challenge facing developers is the number of studios looking for quality work-for-hire projects. Mike Burnham, head of Marmalade Game Studio – which has worked for the likes of Activision, Hasbro and Square Enix on *Call of*

Marmalade Game Studio has worked for a host of clients, including on projects such as Hasbro Arcade (right)

> ***"Ensuring that you create a quality experience within work-for-hire constraints is not always easy."***
>
> Paul Porter, Sumo Digital

Duty and *Lara Croft* games – says rivals can come from dedicated teams in the sector to other independent studios looking for extra revenue streams to pay their bills and work on original IP.

"Mix in with this a strong supply of increasingly well-educated developers entering the fray with great tools at their fingertips and the market place is certainly challenging at the moment," he says.

"Marmalade Game Studio stands tall in this area for all the right reasons; great talent, top class tools, and a strong heritage."

LOOKING INWARDS

As mentioned earlier, while some companies are outsourcing, it could be argued some publishers are moving development in-house, such as Capcom.

Our work-for-hire experts are divided on whether this has been a true issue, given Sumo's work on some hit titles, for example. But Gardner says he feels, at least in the console space, that this has occurred due to the latest hardware transition, in which publishers traditionally tend to build up their internal teams.

He explains that access to confidential development kits and not wanting to give

BUILDING A BUSINESS IN WORK-FOR-HIRE

D3T IS AN IT company that specialises in providing full games development for external companies, as well as other services including porting, optimisation and rendering.

The company currently houses eight full-time software engineers, eight programmers two freelance artists and also offers dedicated QA.

It has worked on titles including *Chimpact* and *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, and most recently worked on a unique 30-player battle re-enactment game on behalf of the new Battle of Bannockburn National Trust for the Scotland visitor centre in Scotland.

D3t was formed in 2011, and co-founder and commercial director Jamie Campbell says it moved into work-for-hire rather than original IP as experience at studios such as Juice Games had taught them the value of a work-for-hire partner, particularly when resources were tight.

"We're familiar with the headaches that go along with the games development cycle: resourcing issues, fire-fighting, new feature development, optimisation and bug fixing to name a few," says Campbell.

"Steve Powell and I decided that from day one, d3t's mission would be to remove development headaches from technical directors and lead programmers by providing world-leading code development services on a work-for-hire basis."

Campbell says building a successful business in this space is about generating word-of-mouth recommendations from a strong portfolio, rather than pushing the firm through SEO spend on Google.

"We'd rather prospective clients heard from people who have benefitted from our involvement in projects – there is no better endorsement," he says.

Campbell also says that any weak links in a work-for-hire studio would mean the development business "simply wouldn't work".

"As a work-for-hire specialist our coding projects are never simple," he says. "Big or small, the challenges our clients put in front of d3t are not for the faint-hearted, they are only for the diligent, the experienced, and the ultimate professionals."

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> ***It's important that clients are reassured that their products won't play second fiddle to our own IP.***
>
> Paul Smith, Strawdog Studios

independent developers a leg up in the field for them to go and work for a competitor could be the cause of a reticence to use work-for-hire in the early days of the PS4 and Xbox One.

"The change this time around though does seem to be that the budgets have continued to climb, though not necessarily above the end of the last-gen games, but it is still a massive amount of money for triple-A development," says Gardner.

"In general there seem to be fewer games in development and a focus on core IP. There are opportunities that arise from this though. There is also the continued and continually growing importance of the mobile sector for larger work-for-hire studios.

"It will be interesting to see if the cycle follows the historical pattern, when some of the internal teams fail to deliver and projects run late. The publishers feel helpless, as they have relatively few tools to manage delivery and hate the bad PR of redundancies. At that point, working with a third-party and paying milestones starts looking very attractive. There are differences this time around though. The console publishers that are left standing seem to be better at managing their teams and having fewer of them mainly focused on successful IP."

Campbell adds that while it may be true that some companies are beginning to move development in-house, he has found demand for d3t's work-for-hire services growing in recent times, and goes back to that all important reputation building that is so vital in the sector.

"We have a reputation for excellence and for delivering on promises, not only throughout the UK but also in Europe and Australasia," he says. "Our export strength comes from our adaptability and our ability to work with different organisational and national cultures, and is an indicator of our client-focused approach."

WORK-FOR-YOU

One of the key questions in work-for-hire is whether or not these companies can also develop their own IP. Blitz attempted combining these two business towards the end of its life, but the releases of the likes of *Kumo Lumo* and *Paper Titans* were ultimately unable to save the business.

Another example is Remode, whose founders Ella Romanos and Martin Darby previously told *Develop* that trying to balance their own IP with work-for-hire was a difficult proposition, leading them to eventually shut down the studio and later open Strike Gamelabs, focusing on original IP.

Strawdog's Smith says, however, he believes it is possible, and even ideal if a studio can make it work, but believes it can be difficult to get the funds to focus on original projects.

"As a studio we haven't yet reached the tipping point where the passive revenues from our own IP or royalty-baring contracts creates enough capital to allow us to fully focus on our own internal game projects," says Smith.

"We find that it's good business practice to have a blend of projects, both internal and client-based. However it's important that work-for-hire clients are reassured that their products won't play second fiddle to our own internal IP. We take great pride in building strong working relationships with our work-for-hire clients and it's extremely important to have empathy for their point of view, which doesn't mean we take a passive role during design and development but does mean we respect their final decisions."

Despite the difficulties many are facing in the work-for-hire space, it seems a focus on the core principles and talent of the studio, as well as creativity, can help studios become a success in this highly competitive field.

And studios that can achieve this could eventually find opportunities to work on titles like *LittleBigPlanet* and *Killzone*, just like the companies mentioned here. ■

FIRED UP

GLASGOW OUTFIT FIREBRAND Games, which now also has a studio in Florida, was formed in 2006 and has worked on numerous titles for the DS handheld, as well as for PC, console and mobile.

Examples of its work include *Hot Wheels: World's Best Drive*, *Cars 2* and *Need for Speed: The Run*.

Firebrand CEO Mark Greenshields says when looking for new projectd, he prefers to work on a few larger titles than numerous smaller games, as these contracts can often incur similar expenditure.

"We have done both and the best is different for each company," he states.

"But in my opinion you do not want lots of small projects as there is an inherent cost in any project – design, project management and engine or tech – whether using your own game engine or another there will still be additional back-end work required.

"Small projects have less budget to support this and a full-time experienced producer for example costs the same on a triple-A console game as it does on a budget mobile game. I prefer a few larger projects.

"But one thing that I think is extremely important is never have a dependence on a single client as that is the reason more developers have gone bust than any other – when a game is pulled. My personal preference is no more than 30 per cent dependence on a single client. Obviously this is not always practical, but is the preferred method from me."

Greenshields says he has noticed many publishers taking projects in-house since 2011, with the move to free-to-play and new-gen console delay creating a sense that work-for-hire had fallen "off a cliff" as companies preserved funds and were not sure how to tackle the markets.

"It is coming back slowly but budgets are definitely under pressure but expectations are high – this in itself creates problems because high quality costs money," he states. "We are, however, pretty good at balancing this but unfortunately for a lot of people it does mean more and more outsourcing to low cost economies to allow the budgets to be hit. We are, however, experienced in this model and our current clients are very happy with the quality as well as value of the work we are producing for them."

As well as work-for-hire projects, Firebrand has also extended its operations to original IP development, having released space puzzle game *Solar Flux* on Steam and mobile.

Despite extending its business, Greenshields says work-for-hire has to take priority – as that's where the studio builds its reputation for quality and timely work, and is ultimately what pays the bills.

"The best way, assuming you have the funds to do so, is to ring fence the original team otherwise they get taken on and off – something we have been guilty of in the past," he admits.

"You have to deliver for your clients so it is a part of original development if you are a WFH developer. Obviously if you have financial backing that covers the WFH then that team never works on WFH."

www.firebrandgames.com

A licence for creativity

Sumo Digital heads tell **Craig Chapple** the route to success in work-for-hire and where the path has taken them

Top to bottom: Sumo Digital chief exec Carl Cavers, studio director Paul Porter, business development manager Craig Albeck and creative director Sean Millard

DURING THE LAST 11 years, Sumo Digital has become one of the UK's biggest studios, and it's all come through its focus on work-for-hire.

Growing from a team of 12 to 250, with a main office in Sheffield and a dedicated art studio in India, the developer has worked on *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, *LittleBigPlanet 2* and *Moshi Monsters: Katsuma Unleashed*.

Most recently, Sumo was chosen to develop the Xbox 360 version of *Forza Horizon 2* and has taken the reigns from Media Molecule on *LittleBigPlanet 3*, one of Sony's key franchises.

CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS

CEO Carl Cavers says the key to building a successful work-for-hire business – a term the team believes is a "cruel expression" for the work they do – is to be creative, even with another company's property.

"We may work on existing IP's, but there isn't anything we've released that hasn't been innovative in one way or another," he says.

"It's still incredibly challenging to be creative given the constraints of a licensed franchise, and we're thankful to have awesome people working in the studio who are motivated and able to respond positively to these challenges."

It's the creativity Sumo aims for that Cavers says plays against the perception that studios working on existing IP can't be as innovative as those working on their own.

"Juggling the many different demands for creative delivery on a licensed product – and doing that with an integrity that expands the franchise universe without making the product feel watered-down or weakened – is as creatively challenging as kicking off with a blank sheet of paper," explains creative director Sean Millard, .

"It's a very practical and commercial level of creativity that is demanded of us; that's sometimes misconstrued as some kind of 'lesser' muse. This is an incorrect assumption. We're just not at liberty to please ourselves – there are many more parties to consider.

> ***"Juggling the demands of a licensed IP is as challenging as kicking off with a blank sheet."***
>
> Sean Millard, Sumo Digital

"I challenge any creative to do that without falling back to a committee. The challenge is not the idea itself; its the realisation."

BIG AMBITIONS

Sumo studio director Paul Porter says another challenge facing work-for-hire companies is putting yourself in a position to pick and choose opportunities that best match the studio's skillset and experience.

Ensuring a quality experience within the constraints of work-for-hire is not always easy, he says, but it has led to the studio working on more high-profile IP such as *LittleBigPlanet*.

Millard says the studio had already forged a relationship with Sony XDev from work on titles such as *Go! Sudoku* and *Super Rub-a-Dub*, and when the possibility of developing an *LBP* title came up, the studio snapped it up.

"We thought it was a great fit given our track record with existing IP," says Millard. "We started small, growing a team to support *LittleBigPlanet Vita* and DLC for *LBP2* to earn our stripes. After hitting the required bar for the franchise, XDev had the comfort to move forward with *LittleBigPlanet 3* wholeheartedly."

Despite working on such major franchises, Sumo also released its own original IP in July: action combat racing game *Scorched* for iPhone, with an Android version on the way.

Business development manager Craig Albeck says the experience was invaluable as it gave the company first-hand experience on how the free-to-play marketplace works and how to develop a title based on small play sessions. It also helped prepare the studio to manage the lifecycle of a mobile title that requires a 'games-as-a-service' approach.

"In our hearts we really want to be spending our days developing great games, be it original titles like *Scorched*, or infusing new life into an existing franchise, as we are with *LBP 3*, and have achieved previously with the *Sonic & Sega All-Stars* franchise," he says.

"We follow the opportunities and respond accordingly based on our experience, mitigating the risk as much as possible for our clients, whilst delivering the best game that we can in collaboration with the customer. And it's with that approach we shall move forward with a fantastic team into whatever opportunities lie ahead." ■

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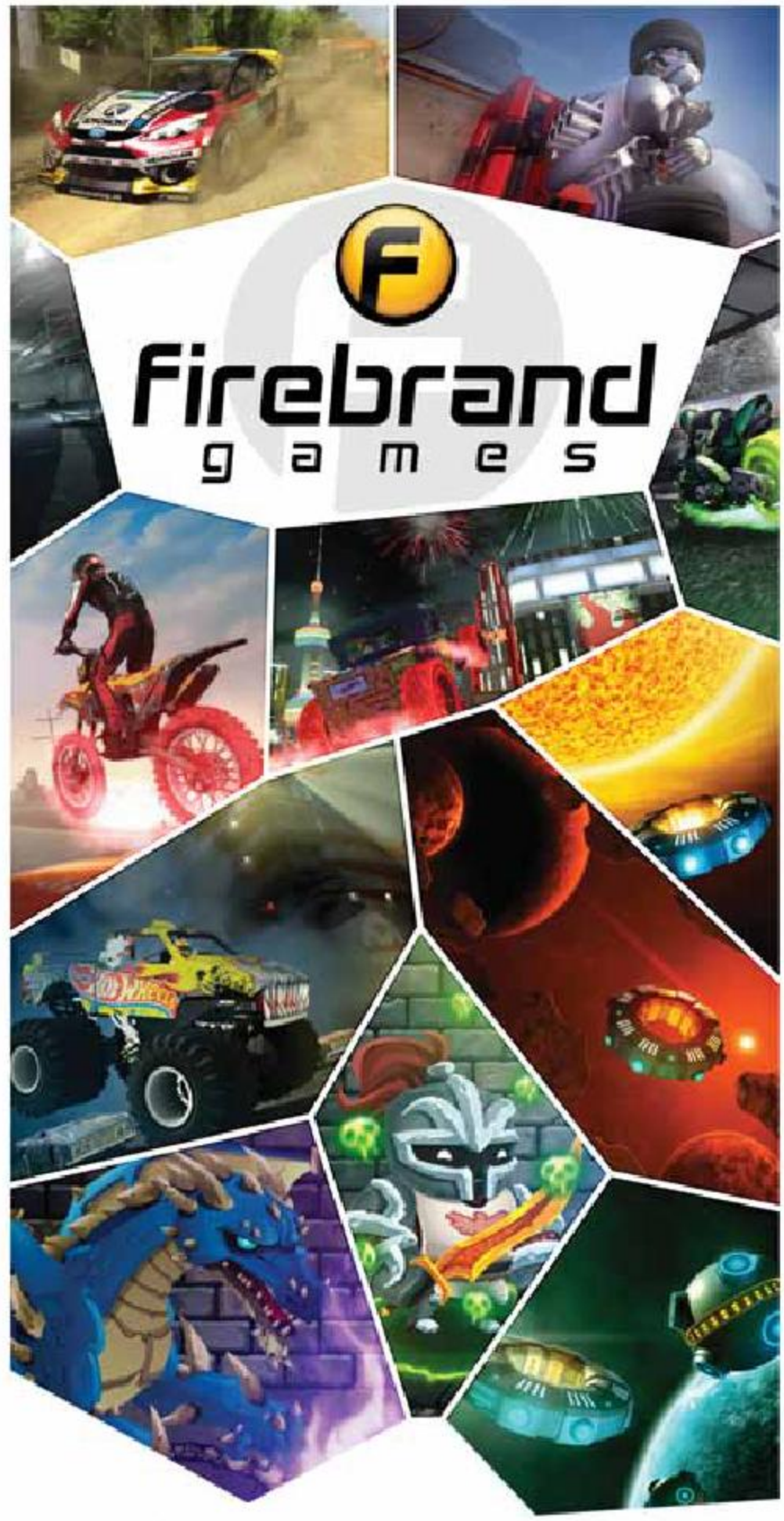

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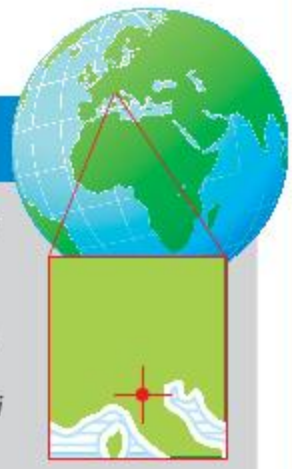
Italy's gaming renaissance

The boot-shaped nation is home to a handful of successful games developers, but thanks to increasing government support and new digital possibilities, Italy could soon have the world's attention. **James Batchelor** asks local studios about this changing market



REGION FOCUS: LIVERPOOL

Number of game industry employees: 700+
Number of game studios: 100+
Notable companies: Bad Seed, Digital Tales, Forge Reply, Milestone, MixedBag, Ovosonico, Storm in a Teacup, Ubisoft Milan
Notable games: *SBK* series, *Moto GP*, *Murasaki Baby*, *Nero*, *Forma.8*, *Futuridium EP*, *In Space We Brawl*
Local population: 60,782,668

ITALY IS ONE of Europe's biggest gaming markets and, believe it or not, one of the biggest in the world. The revenues generated put Italy at number four in European rankings and 9th when it comes to the rest of the world. Game sales came in at over €1bn last year.

With 21m gamers making up 30 per cent of the population, it would be safe to assume Italy is also home to a crowded development community. But interestingly, it's a market when there's still a lot of room to grow.

"I would define the games development scene here as an emerging one," Thalita Malago, secretary general of trade body AESVI, tells *Develop*. "Besides two major studios founded in late '80s and '90s – Milestone and Ubisoft Milan – it has mainly grown mainly in the last three years."

Mauro Fanelli, co-founder of Turin-based indie MixedBag, agrees: "Italy is historically more a consumer country than a producing one. But in the last few years, we have seen a growing presence of little and medium start-ups trying to change that assumption."

> ***"Creating video games in Italy is hard but we are working harder every day to make it easier."***
>
> Jacopo Musso, Bad Seed

Jacopo Musso, CEO at mobile developer Bad Seed, adds: "The video games landscape in Italy is slowly evolving. We're still behind other big regions, but we are gaining awareness day by day. We're even changing as a community as we are closely in touch with other studios and companies ready to help each other whenever it's possible.

"In a way, it can be seen as a big family. Creating video games in Italy is hard but we are working harder every day to make it easier. It's still difficult, but something is definitely changing."

STUDIO SUPPORT

Awareness of Italy's development scene is certainly something that Dario Migliavacca, managing director of Ubisoft Milan, would like to see raised. Despite working on the *Just Dance* series, and the animations for the upcoming *Assassin's Creed Rogue*, the studio is one of Ubisoft's lesser-known subsidiaries.

"Ubisoft has studios all around the world – some of them very famous – but there are still quite a few people who don't know that we have one here in Milan," he says.

"But we were born in 1998 and we're more alive and kicking than ever, with 20 games released over 17 years.

Milan (pictured) will be hosting a week-long celebration of games later this month, raising awareness of the talent found in Italian studios

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Top to bottom: AESVI's secretary general Thalita Malago and Milestone development head Michele Caletti

Main: Racing is one of the genres of choice for Italian gamers, so local developer Milestone has thrived with its SBK and MotoGP titles

"We have collaborated with other Ubisoft studios to develop *Rayman, Splinter Cell, Beyond Good & Evil, Rabbids, Just Dance* and *Assassin's Creed*. We are also proud to have trained a lot of talented professionals in Italy that now work in other companies or founded their own indie studio."

STUDIO SUPPORT

The Italian games industry is gathering more and more attention thanks to heightened activity from organisations such as the Italian Game Industry Association – or, to the locals, Associazione Editori Sviluppatori Videogiochi Italiani (AESVI).

The trade body has established annual events that attract developers and publishers around the world, as well as celebrate native talent, and it actively campaigns to improve the environment for new and smaller studios.

"Three years ago our Association launched a special program to support game developers in Italy," explains Malago. "We support their '360-degree development': they develop games; we help them develop their skills, their market knowledge and their network. In one word, their business.

"Since 2012 we have organised the Italian Game Developers Summit (IGDS), an event where studios can exchange experiences, meet potential business partners, take inspiration from international speakers, and showcase their games."

The 2014 IGDS takes place in Milan this month, with AESVI expecting hundreds of people to attend. The summit is also held alongside Milan Games Week, Italy's largest celebration of video games and the industry.

AESVI has also launched the umbrella brand 'Games in Italy', which is used to promote the best Italian studios at international fairs. Following Milan Games Week, the trade body will be taking ten developers to Game Connection Europe in Paris, thanks to support from the Italian Trade Agency.

And, crucially, the association is helping to raise awareness of funding options for studios and campaigning to have the government introduce tax relief similar to that of the UK and other markets (*see 'Funding in Italy'*).

The impact of these initiatives is certainly being felt, according to Michele Caletti, head of development at *SBK* and *Moto GP* studio Milestone: "When I started, a long time ago, the situation was different. Thanks to the special attention that the government and trade organisations such as AESVI are putting in it, things are improving.

"There are still some areas of improvement, but the road that has been taken is the right one. As a developer, I really appreciate this growing and thriving era that video games are experiencing in Italy."

Alessandro Mazzega, PR and business development boss at Develop Awards finalist

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FUNDING IN ITALY

DEVELOPERS IN ITALY are able to seek funding and support from two programmes.

The first is the Italian Trade Agency's internationalisation grants, which help eligible firms take part in selected international fairs in the games sector, where they can promote Italy.

Secondly, the government's start-ups legislation supports new businesses linked to innovation and technology, as well as incubators, accelerators and private investors. There are additional measures of support available, including tax incentives, assistance in legal, corporate and fiscal activities, and more.

Ubisoft Milan's Dario Migliavacca (*pictured*) says that these are a marked improvement on the support initiatives of previous years: "Italy is famous for many things but not for being an easy place to do business. Nevertheless, AESVI is achieving many important goals in promoting the games industry.

"The next main objectives to reach are, as in movie production, tax credit and tax shelter for our industry. It would represent a significant step forward for our investments."

With tax levels and the cost of living in Italy's major cities relatively high, Digital Tales boss Giovanni Bazzoni agrees: "The Italian government has hardly ever given any form of tax relief to support the gaming industry, but we hope that will change soon, thanks to AESVI's continued efforts and growing interest in gaming as a cultural medium and a business in its own right."

Forge Reply, agrees: "Institutions are realising that games development is an important industry and Italian companies deserve the same attention already given in other countries. Tax credit and tax shelter programs are just two of the goals that AESVI is working on and we're looking forward to the results."

Back in 2012, the nation's government approved a Law Decree that enabled more support for the creation and development of start-ups and other new businesses connected to technology and innovation, including games development.

Meanwhile, Digital Tales CEO Giovanni Bazzoni says the Italian Trade Agency has been invaluable when promoting and distributing his games in foreign markets, as have other government bodies and even some European initiatives.

"Some time ago, the local Chamber of Commerce selected one of our projects and awarded us with a free trip to North America to pitch it at an industry event," he explains. "Our latest concept entered the Creative Europe Media Programme and we are going to receive some European Community funds to develop a prototype for a console game, which will help us enhance our proprietary technology for next-gen hardware."

Malago adds: "We are working closely with government to ensure that they understand the development of a local games industry is key to promote sustainable growth and employment – particularly youth employment – as well as to create innovation, increase social mobility and attract Italy investments and talented people from abroad."

PUBLISHER PRESENCE

While Ubisoft Milan is one of the only publisher-owned studios in the area, larger firms are taking more interest in Italy's game-makers. Most publishers have distribution and marketing offices in the area.

Sony held a PlayStation Open Day in Rome earlier this year, sharing advice on how to get games published. And dialogues are well established between international publishers and Italian developers.

"All major publisher and platform holders have strong local presence, some of them run a local development studio and, in general, they're all open and interested in talking with new studios," says Massimo Guarini, CEO and co-founder of *Murasaki Baby* dev Ovosonico.

"Thanks to the international nature of this industry, it becomes quite easy to access international hubs through publisher's local subsidiaries, helping valid ideas to reach immediate international relevance."

Alberto Belli, co-founder of start-up Storm in a Teacup, adds: "I came from publishing and when it was retail only, scouting for good games was something really related to event and personal research. Now, all the companies here are working to find good projects from Italian studios and there is a good chance to find cool stuff in development around.

> ***"As a developer, I really appreciate this growing and thriving era of video games in Italy."***
>
> Michele Caletti, Milestone

"We're working with Microsoft Italy trough ID@Xbox and they're helping us very much with *Nero's* marketing activities, PR and so on. Indies usually don't like publishers because of an old way of thinking. Publishers are friends, not enemies – they're the best thing that could happen to your game."

ITALY'S GOT TALENT

Expanded opportunities for indies and digital game devs have also helped highlight the talent indigenous to Italy. However, while universities are stepping up the number of games-related courses (*see 'University Challenge', p41*), local studios say a lot of this talent comes from within.

"Most key skills are still developed at work," says Bazzoni, "but the widespread availability

Many of Italy's studios were only opened in the last three years as support from trade body AESVI and government has improved the environment for start-ups

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UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE

THE INTRODUCTION OF games design and other related courses into universities has been a recent but nonetheless welcome change in the Italian games market.

There are plenty of prime examples. The University of Verona, for instance, has been running a Masters in computer game development for years.

Meanwhile, the University of Milan is introducing a new computer science and video games degree with the help of the nearby Ubisoft studio.

Finally, the Politecnico of Milan runs a video game design and programming course.

And more developers are keen to help their local academic institutes introduce similar courses.

"In Turin, where we are based, we are trying with other studios to establish strong relationships with local universities," said MixedBag's Mauro Fanelli.

Bad Seed's Jacopo Musso adds: "There is a good synergy between the industry and universities, most of lecturers are professional developers working in the industry.

"The ecosystem is growing and we have now more and more skilled graduates, mostly programmers and artists, able to join a development team being ready to work."

Ovosonico's Massimo Guarini says the link between development and academia is a two-way relationship, with studio endorsements resulting in media exposure for the studio and plenty of fresh hires.

"If you run a development studio in Italy, it's quite common to find yourself teaching or giving lectures in some important university sooner or later," he says.

"Universities that, thanks to their international fame, have already managed to invite for lectures international guests such as David Cage, Nolan Bushnell and Goichi Suda."

of cross-platform engines fostered a good level of expertise, supported by the strong motivation of many a young hobby developer who cut their teeth with self-published mobile titles before entering the industry proper."

Mazzega adds: "We also have great artists and their background comes from many different kind of studies, like comics and visual arts. Traditionally, Italian concept artists and illustrators have always been achieving great results, even abroad.

"The situation about coders has been changing lately. We used to face issues when looking for talents, since a solid theoretical basis was rarely paired by specific games development expertise."

While many of Italy's aspiring developers are setting up studios in their home market, more have already emigrated to established development hubs around the world to work on some of the industry's biggest games.

"If we brought back all Italian professionals around the world, we could build a real dream team and deliver something never seen before," says Belli. "It would be great to start a new 'Made in Italy' venture, starting from our industry and products."

A TASTE OF ITALY

Unsurprisingly, the most popular games in Italy are football-based, with racing and FPS titles also enjoying popularity. But the output of Italy's development scene is more varied.

Most studios are working on mobile, PC and online games, although there is a healthy contingent with a console focus. Some are experimenting with different types of games.

Last year, for example, Studio Evil won the Future of Health award with its *Relive* project, a motion-controlled title that trains people in CPR. Meanwhile, Milan-based dev We Are Müesli won the Bosch Art Foundation's art game competition with its visual novel *Cave! Cave! Deus Videt*.

This diversity of content means competition between studios in Italy is far from heated.

"We are all competing in a global market, so we don't see one another as rivals," says Mazzega. "The accomplishments of one company can benefit the Italian industry as a whole, drawing the attention of players, press outlets and the international businesses."

Looking forward, AESVI's Malago is confident of "significant growth" in the next few years for Italy's development scene thanks to studios' plans to expand, the rise of start-ups and new university courses.

"What speaks in favour of Italian developers is a fine combination of technical competence and creativity, which already defines the 'Made in Italy' brand in many other fields of excellence such as fashion and design," she adds. "We hope we will become the next rising star in the games industry firmament.

"Even if the support available from the government is still limited, Italy is living a generational change at all levels that we believe will benefit the development of a local games industry in the near future."

Milestone's Caletti adds: "We're growing fast, and we're very lively and creative. From Santa Ragione's *Mirror Moon*, to Ovosonico's *Murasaki Baby*, to a number of smaller titles, it's all about creativity and building a strong identity. Game jams, talents, thinking out of usual schemes produces promising results. Where we've we lacked in terms of network – studios, universities, government – we've learned to gain in quality and determination.

"It's clear that we have to create a momentum we can then ride on, and give the current economic situation it's not easy. But we're getting more and more ambitious, and there's a lot of room for growing, and to make memorable games."

MixedBag's Fanelli adds that the small studios are the ones to watch. With the market becoming increasingly supportive of new businesses and digital opening up new opportunities, the next star of Italy won't necessarily be triple-A.

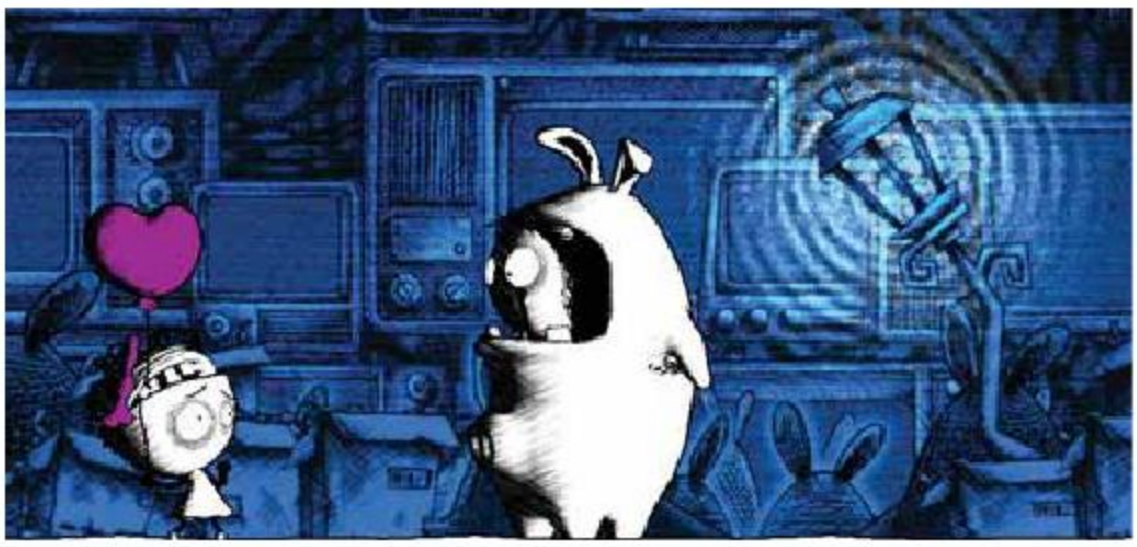
"There are lots of interesting projects are being worked on in Italy right now," he says. "The self publishing possibilities and lower barriers of entry really opened up the market. I think next year will be full of nice surprises from Italian developers." ■

Italy's development community will be out in force at next month's Italian Game Developers Summit, which runs in Milan from October 24th to 26th. You can find out more at ***www.igds.it***

Above: Storm in a Teacup's Alberto Belli says there is plenty of publisher and platform holder support for Italian devs

Main: The animations for Assassin's Creed Rogue were developed at Ubisoft Milan, and the studio is keen to raise awareness of its work

Below left: Murasaki Baby, one of Vita's more striking upcoming titles, was developed by Italian studio Ovosonico



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On Reflections:
From bedrooms to blockbusters

Newcastle-based developer Reflections turns 30 this year, and its team has come a long way from the days of Destruction Derby and Driver. **James Batchelor** visited the studio to find out what it has learned along the way

REFLECTIONS IS NOT only the oldest studio in Ubisoft's global empire of subsidiaries, it's also one of the longest-running in the UK.

Established in 1984, the studio celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, with a current headcount of 230 spread across triple-A titles such as *The Crew*, *Tom Clancy's The Division* and the latest iteration of *Just Dance*.

It's a far cry from what welcomed producer Will Musson on his first day back in 1994.

"When I joined, there were six people," he says. "There was Martin Edmonson – who'd be out spreading the word rather than in the office – one artist, and four programmers. And together we made *Destruction Derby*."

This 3D racer launched alongside the original PlayStation, and the studio's biggest hit to date. But the team's creative appetite was no longer satisfied by single projects. Instead they began prototyping multiple games. Not all were released, but one experiment eventually defined the studio.

"It started because of *Destruction Derby 2*," Musson explains. "That game had a figure-of-eight track, and that sparked in Martin's mind an idea: Could we not make this a bigger and more open world? It was highly ambitious, but we went with it.

"At the time we thought we could only make it for PC, that it wouldn't possibly work on consoles. But it became obvious very soon – not only because of the hype the game was getting, but also because of Sony's growth – that we had to get it on PlayStation."

> ***"After Driver, it was very odd to be geeky games people suddenly flung into the idea that you're famous."***
>
> Will Musson, Reflections

That game was, of course, *Driver* and the impact it had on Reflections was "astonishing", according to Musson. The *Derby* games had already enjoyed reasonable success, but *Driver* thrust the team into the mainstream.

"We were receiving awards, on magazine covers, going down to parties in London," Musson recalls. "It felt a bit rock and roll – Huggy Bear from *Starsky & Hutch* was at our *Driver* party. It was very odd to be geeky games people suddenly flung into the idea that you're famous."

DRIVEN FORWARD

Fast-forward to 2014 and Musson says life at the studio is "a hundred million miles different".

"*Destruction Derby* was made in a bedroom," he says. "There weren't any processes, we were just enjoying ourselves and having fun. We still do that today, but there's a lot more professionalism. People understand that roles like producer are much more important these days. I think there's still some growing up to do, but there isn't as much naivety any more."

One of the biggest developments has been the acquisition by Ubisoft back in 2006. While the purchase of Reflections was nothing new – over the years it has passed through the hands of Infogrames, GT Interactive and Atari – this particular change has left a lasting impression on the studio and the way it operates.

"Ubisoft felt like the right partnership, and not just for stability but for their innovation

Reflections' headcount now stands at 230, with up to 40 more positions yet to fill – not bad for a developer that started life as six people in a bedroom

Destruction Derby and Driver went on to define Reflections' reputation for expertise in open world and driving games

Musson (above) says Reflections' structure and collaboration process allows its employees to gain experience on a range of genres without moving to another studio

and desire to push quality," says Musson. "Before, we were very much of the attitude that only we could make our games. But Ubisoft made us realise you need draw on other studios' expertise. So we're now fully on board with the collaboration model, because we know it's how you make triple-A games."

Managing director Pauline Jacquey stresses that the acquisition has not changed the Reflections ethos: "It's not McDonalds – every Ubisoft studio has a slightly different approach.

"We can use all the best practices from the rest of Ubisoft, we use their tech, we're in touch with our international studios on a daily basis, but we can also do things our own way."

Ubisoft's policy of collaboration can be seen in any of its major games. *Assassin's Creed Unity* is being developed across ten studios, *Far Cry 4* across five. While Reflections has yet to work on either IP, it is co-developing *The Crew* with Ivory Tower and *The Division* with Massive Entertainment, and helped out with new IP *Watch Dogs* earlier this year.

Jacquey says these collaborations are "based around the skillset of our guys", giving *The Division* as an example. With the strength of Reflections' UI team, this aspect features heavily in the mandate drawn up between the Newcastle studio and Massive. But that's not the area Reflections is best known for.

"Our expertise is in open world games," says Musson. "There are not many studios that have been making those as long as we have. We know what we're doing – and that's not just in terms of the technology behind it, but also how you use that world, how you put missions together, how the gamer can play around. People can learn those things from us, as well as our production methods."

> ***"It's not McDonalds – every Ubisoft studio has a slightly different approach. We can do things our way."***
>
> Pauline Jacquey, Reflections

Naturally, vehicles are another major area fellow Ubisoft devs seek help with.

"And we don't just mean muscle cars," says Jacquey. "We mean helicopters, bikes, jet packs, hovercrafts, submarines: we know how to create toys that are really fun to play with in an open world. The idea of the journey, taking the most fun route from point A to point B, is going to drive us in years to come."

NEWCASTLE EXPORTS

Collaboration has allowed the team to significantly influence titles in other genres, too. One Reflections employee told us that almost every new feature from the last few *Just Dance* games originated in Newcastle. So does the studio get enough credit for its work?

"We're working in big international teams, so people shouldn't care which studio they belong to – they're making a difference both as individuals and as a team," says Jacquey. "We need to make sure what we create is of a high quality and consistent with the IP – the players really don't care which bits were created at which studio."

The MD adds that Reflections is fully integrated with the other Ubisoft studios, so all teams work closely in alignment with their international partners.

"It doesn't really matter which country you're in – we know who is strong at doing what and where they are," Jacquey adds.

The studio's current headcount of 230 is by no means the largest it has been. During the

Reflections' teams are comparitively small when it comes to triple-A development, but they're in contact with other Ubisoft studios on a daily basis, sharing both knowledge and tech

peak of production on *Driver: San Francisco*, up to 270 people were working at the studio.

This growth has also brought more diversity to the team. Reflections hires internationally, with roughly 30 per cent of the team from abroad and 20 nationalities among them.

And, as different projects require Reflections to scale up and down, the studio is continuing to grow. At the moment, it is hiring an extra 30 to 40 people. But Jacquey's keen to avoid expanding too quickly.

> ***"We're never producing the same game. Even with sequels, there's something new to learn."***
>
> Will Musson, Reflections

"I have no plans to double the size of the studio," she says. "Growth needs to be reasonable so that we can improve our processes, and it's very hard to do that when you're rushing to grow. One of our biggest strengths is you can work on big triple-A games in small teams: we offer the best of two worlds, and I'd like to keep this. I have no intention of running a gigantic studio."

Fortunately, the new intake hasn't squeezed out Reflections veterans like Musson, with around 40 long-standing employees still at the studio.

Musson says: "There's a backbone of people who have experienced Reflections' journey. They're now high up and still have the ethos we've always had. Even I was surprised by how many have been here more than ten years."

So why do they stay? In an industry where developers are often changing studios, how does Reflections retain its talent?

"For me, it's because we're always changing," says Musson. "We're never producing the same game. Even with sequels, there's something new to learn, new technology to master.

"And there's all these other projects to work on. You can move on to help develop *The Division, The Crew*, or our unannounced games. Most people move between studios because they want a new experience, but actually you can get that here."

THE FUTURE OF REFLECTIONS

Given that the studio's legacy stretches back 30 years, it is perhaps strange that the team has yet to lead its own collaboration. But both Jacquey and Musson believe that, despite the developer's extensive experience, there is good reason why we've yet to see Reflections headline a triple-A Ubisoft title.

"We're not ready yet," Jacquey says. "If we want to create something that is a game-changer and phenomenal – and that will happen one day – we can't fail.

"Everything we do now is preparing us. It's not like we have a deadline where in two or three years we need to be able to lead a game – the speed is in our hands.

"Working in collaboration is super comfortable. When you have the chance to work with Paris, Montreal and Massive in the same year on three games as different as *Watch Dogs, Just Dance and The Division*, you're learning much more than when you work for four or five years on the same game."

Whatever Reflections' next hit will be, there's no doubt that it will play to the studio's strengths. In a certain corner of the building – literally behind locked doors – there are unannounced titles under development, but it doesn't take a genius to guess what types of games they might be.

"It's the way the industry is going – games are becoming open world and online," says Musson. "With our experience and heritage, why would we not be there?"

So fingers crossed for a new-gen *Driver* soon, then. ■

AN INDIE IN TRIPLE-A CLOTHING

REFLECTIONS IS PRESENTED to us as 'a triple-A studio with an indie spirit' – but how can a developer that is owned by one of the world's largest publishers ever claim to be indie?

MD Pauline Jacquey says this refers to both Reflections' roots and how it operates today: "This started with Martin Edmonson creating games in his bedroom in '84. It was just a group of friends doing something adventurous together, and this spirit is still very much alive in the studio today.

"People can pitch things in a 'bottom up' way. It's not like there's a big plan that's totally solid – we build the plans with the rest of the team, so it's pretty organic and iterative."

Producer Will Musson adds: "Everyone has a voice, even the interns and junior developers. This creates what we like to think of as an indie spirit and we hope they want to be part of a team.

"The overall feeling is very much as it was in the early days: everyone here is very much part of something big. Granted that 'big' has got bigger, but everyone's part of it. And there's a lot more movement within staff; you're not just stuck on one project. You can move from team to team."

The studio also has a small experimental group – less than ten people, a mix of experts and interns – that work on new prototypes for new tech and games.

"They're working like we would have done in the '80s or '90s, or like start-ups are doing nowadays," says Jacquey. "It allows us to take risks and make mistakes – although, hopefully not too many. And hopefully, we'll find something special."

idc14

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Imagination

#DEVELOPJOBS

Your monthly guide to the best career opportunities in games development worldwide

MOVERS AND SHAKERS:
Meet Cliff Bleszinski's new team at Boss Key Productions
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RECRUITER HOT SEAT:
Brazilian dev Odin Game Studio discusses what it looks for in new recruits
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Why students can now publish mobile games straight to Vita
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The growth of Oculus

The VR company's VP of product Nate Mitchell discusses the firm's growth and how Facebook has affected the talent it is attracting and who it is looking to hire

by Alex Calvin

THIS YEAR, SOME of the best and brightest in the industry have headed to Oculus VR, including 343 Industries' Kenneth Scott, Google's Adrian Wong, Naughty Dog's Jason Rubin and PopCap's Bernard Yee.

Oculus' VP of product Nate Mitchell tells *Develop* that historically the firm has staffed its development business faster than other areas.

"The company was initially led by 90 per cent engineers," he says. "We didn't spend a huge amount on business people. Now we're an organisation of 175 people and we are constantly doing partnerships with our publishing divisions, and that's why we need more great business people, such as Jason Rubin. But development always comes first."

There are a huge number of senior developers working at the firm – which was essential when Oculus was a start-up – but fresh blood is needed.

"Even now Oculus has a higher average age than most games start-ups," Mitchell says. "It helped us move fast because we had talented people to tackle hard problems.

"But when you look at building a sustainable company you really do need a younger talent pool. Younger talent also generally brings creative thinking, not more so than the other, it's outside the box thinking. We've done a lot to ramp up an internship programme and made a significant amount of junior hires.

> ***"We need more great business people, but development comes first."***
>
> Nate Mitchell, Oculus VR

"If I could go back in time, I'd set those things up sooner – they're not easy things to put in place. As soon as you bring on interns, someone has to supervise them. There are trade-offs at every turn. We're reaching the point for sustained growth in the future."

But in spite of its acquisition by Facebook, Mitchell says that the firm is being careful about its growth

"There's never been a number that we wanted to grow to," he says. "The rule of thumb is that you never want to scale a company by 60 per cent annually because you end up with more young people than old people and lose a sense of culture.

"It's so hard to add that many people. We have 175 now, so if we round that up to 200, maybe next year we'll be around the 300 mark. We'll only grow as much as we need to."

So how has the Facebook acquisition affected how new faces arrive at the VR firm?

"For a lot of people Oculus was still a start-up. I'd argue it still is," Mitchell says. "There's a huge amount of risk in that. And for people taking big salaries at Google, Microsoft or Apple, it's hard to walk away to join this VR start-up.

"When Facebook steps in, it really adds a long-term stability and removes a lot of the risk. It starts to feel like a real thing. And the benefits don't hurt. We can now afford new talent. There are people whose base salaries were way out of our price range. We had equity for our employees, and that's meant to offset our salary costs. Now we are owned by Facebook, we can offer more normal salaries."

When Facebook purchased Oculus, there was talk about the VR hardware having uses outside of gaming. Has the firm's needs changed to reflect this?

"Our development needs haven't changed, except for the need for fewer web engineers. Facebook has a lot of those," Mitchell says. ■

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

This month: Boss Key, Testronic, Kwalee, Big Fish and

BOSS KEY HIRING RUN

BOSS KEY ■ CLIFF BLESZINSKI'S new studio has made a number of high profile senior hires.

CHRIS MIELKE (senior producer), **JOSHUA PARKER** (senior gameplay programmer), **CHRIS WELLS** (senior character artist), **SHANE SMITH** (IT director), J**AMES HAWKINS** (senior concept artist), **DAVID ROSE** (UI designer) and **RYAN PALSER** (senior animator) have all joined in development positions. Meanwhile **SARAH ASBY** has been hired as executive assistant.

These developers have worked on the likes of *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty*.

"The key to building a successful company is to surround yourself with quality people, especially the ones who can do things you can't," Bleszinski said.

"Arjan Brussee and I are excited to continue working with some of the people who have inspired us and helped us create great work, as well as to hire fresh blood to bring new perspectives and talents to the table."

TESTRONIC ■ The QA and localisation firm has appointed industry veteran **ANN HURLEY** as its head of games business development.

Prior to this, Hurley held the role of business development director at CultureTranslate and before that worked at companies including Pole to Win, retailer The Webb Group and publishers Infogrames and Eidos.

"It's fantastic having such an experienced sales person on board here at Testronic to complement the marketing strategy," said the firm's director of marketing Stuart Rice. "I have no doubt that Ann will prove to be an invaluable asset."

BIG FISH ■ **BIG FISH** – The casual games company has hired **ROBERT CHAMBERLAIN** as its chief financial officer.

Chamberlain has held a series of high profile roles within the industry, including being chief financial officer of casual games firm PopCap.

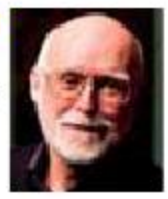
"After more than a decade of strong financial performance, Big Fish is now an industry-leading mobile game company," said chief exec and founder Paul Thelen.

"Bob's experience as a tech and game industry financial leader is an asset to our senior management team, and he's a great cultural fit."

KWALEE ■ **JASON FALCUS** has joined UK mobile firm Kwalee. He will serve in the role of chief operating officer.

Kwalee was set up by Codemasters co-founder David Darling, who has previously worked with Falcus at the racing studio.

"I've known Jason for 26 years, and we have worked together on many games for Codemasters," said Darling. "He started programming at a very young age and since then he has completed more than 20 games and founded and managed several development studios including Atomic Planet Entertainment and Optimus Software."



HINTERLAND GAMES ■ *Elder Scrolls III* and *IV* lead designer Ken Rolston has joined Hinterland Games as the new studio's designer-in-residence.

The games industry veteran will help with work on the developer's upcoming debut title *The Long Dark*, a first-person survival game.

Rolston has had a lengthy career in the sector, leading design on big role-playing games such as Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

The designer has also previously worked on titles such as *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* during his time at Big Huge Games.

THIS IS **WHERE WE WORK**

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Climax Studios

Portsmouth, United Kingdom
www.climaxstudios.com

Work-for-hire studio Climax's quirky office is situated in Portsmouth. Despite being known for work on serious games including *Silent Hill*, its staff are clearly big fans of *Mickey Mouse*, *Star Wars* and puppets from TV ads.

RECRUITER **HOT** SEAT

Odin Game Studio founder **Alexandre Kikuchi** explains why developers may want to head to Brazil

BIO
Name: Alexandre Kikuchi
Title: Founder & Developer
Developer: Odin Game Studio
Country: Brazil
www.odingamestudio.com.br

What differentiates your studio from other developers?
At the very beginning, we wanted to make the type of games that we want to play and used market research to discover how we could fit our interests into the market. To do this we created a lot of different apps and advergames, which gave us a great amount of knowledge.

We then started to focus on evolving our management process and our monthly income to make our own games. From developing all of this, we managed to generate enough resources to open our very own office.

Finally, each member of our team brings different specialities. I specialise in management so we can hit deadlines, another comes from an IT background and we also have a member of the team who is finishing his studies in game design.

Overall there are four of us from different backgrounds and areas that give us the benefit of four varying opinions on how we approach the development of games.

How many staff are you looking to take on?
We don't want to grow too much right now. We need a big hit before we can expand considerably, but we will be looking to hire one more person during 2014 to make the team stronger. We also plan to hire two more next year. That is if our current strategy goes according to plan.

What perks are available to working at your studio?
We let everyone make their own game ideas. In order to decide what projects we want to pursue, everyone at the studio has an input and we then decide together which one to focus on.

Of course, we really need to focus our development ideas based on market research and we either eliminate or put on hold games that can't be completed within an eight-month timescale.

We focus on giving everyone the opportunity to adapt and evolve their skills and always focus on the entire team growing in experience and technical knowledge.

What should aspiring developers do with their CV to help ensure they get an interview?
In Brazil specifically, aspiring developers need to focus on growing their knowledge instead of pursuing big salaries.

> ***"The worst interviewee was someone who immediately asked what the salary was before anything else."***

We do pay our staff well but, because it's hard for the company to grow, we like to work with people who understand the difficulties of the games market and want to work with us in growing the company and facing challenges.

Having a demo, game lab or something that can prove your skills is vital to getting a job.

Who is the best interviewee you have ever had and how did they impress you?
Our best one is André, who is working with us now. He showed us some great demos, but the most important part of his interview was his enthusiasm and passion for developing games.

I remember when interviewing him, he said to me: "I love your work, you must hire me because I will work hard, you must hire me, I have all the required skills."

And who was the worst interview you've ever had?
The worst interviewee was someone who came in and immediately asked what the salary was before anything else. I had to tell him "If you want to get rich fast, this is not the place for you. Working in this area and in our country at the moment will not make you rich."

What advice would you give for a successful interview at your studio?
Show us that you have a passion to create games, be persistent and prove that you can learn new skills fast.

If you have recruited internationally, what is the process like?
We have only recruited people from Brazil in the past.

How have your recruitment needs changed at your studio?
It hasn't changed very much. We are still learning how to better evaluate recruitment procedures.

Why should developers join you when indie and self-publishing have become more accessible?
One of our key focuses is that we share experience with our colleagues. We don't keep the knowledge for ourselves, everyone in the company can grow and develop their skills.

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GET THAT JOB

Development specialists offer advice on how you can bag that career leap

THIS MONTH: SENIOR PROGRAMMER

SEGA HARDLIGHT'S ALASTAIR Graham discusses the key skills needed to get into programming and work up to a senior position.

What is your job role?
I'm a senior programmer from Sega's Hardlight Studios. I've worked within the games industry for around 12 years on a wide array of titles and platforms.

I've been in my current position at Hardlight for just under a year now. My current job role has developed into mainly working on the Android systems for all of our games, although I've got experience working on most aspects of console and mobile projects.

How would someone become a senior programmer?
Experience and a willingness to learn is the key here. The hardest steps in programming are really that initial push to write your first program by yourself – from that stage on every attempt will get easier. No programmers know everything; all you need is the self-confidence to dive into new things head-first. Set yourself goals and really work towards getting there. Split overwhelming tasks into smaller tasks and after that anything then is achievable.

> ***"The hardest step in programming is really that initial push to write your first program."***
> Alastair Graham, Hardlight

Even after getting into the industry, the desire to push yourself is vital to progression. If you get the opportunity to work slightly outside your comfort zone, go for it. My career in mobile has come about through driving myself to learn a new skill in my own time.

What qualifications and/or experience do you need?
A degree in a relevant subject is always a plus, but not everything. The degrees related to games programming seem to be coming along in leaps and bounds, but in my opinion the ability to show your own talent, outside of university work, is far more valuable.

Any extracurricular work you do will be rewarded tenfold.

What do you look for when recruiting a senior programmer?
An applicant applying directly into a senior role will generally have experience working on a few titles in a relevant role, although this isn't always the case for specifics such as server engineers. A real passion for programming is usually apparent from the applicants past projects or portfolio; the majority of our programmers will have worked on their own projects in their spare time, purely for the fun and learning experience.

What opportunities are there for career progression?
Senior programmers usually move one of two directions, either into a more management style role or deeper into a specific area of programming. This is a bit of a sliding scale and I've known a lot of programmers go into hands-on management positions where they still contribute to the code.

If you've got job advice to share, email **Aaron.Lee@intentmedia.co.uk**

Employee HOT SEAT

QA analyst **Lindsey Jordan** talks about getting a job at Lichdom: Battlemage developer Xaviant

What do you do at the studio?
I am a quality assurance analyst at Xaviant. I play *Lichdom* a lot. To be more specific; as a QA analyst I work with all of our various game disciplines (art, animation, engineering, and production) to verify that their work is functioning as expected in the game client.

One of my favorite things about my job is that I have the opportunity to work with and learn about every discipline that has to come together to create a game.

How did you get your current job?
The road to getting my job began six years ago when I started as an entry level contract employee for a large MMO gaming company. I then moved on to working at another large studio as a full-time entry level tester. I worked my tail off and was promoted to a senior tester a year and a half later. I spent several years as a senior tester until my husband got a new job and I needed to find employment closer to my home.

Xaviant is practically in my backyard so I had been watching their job postings like a hawk. When Xaviant posted the quality assurance analyst job, I applied online and was interviewed shortly after applying.

What perks are available to those working at the studio?
The biggest perk at Xaviant is that I get to work on an amazing game, *Lichdom: Battlemage*. I've been very lucky in my career to not get saddled (no pun intended) with testing something like *Pink Ponies: Return of the Pony Queen*. I get to come to work and play a game that I actually enjoy. I'm sure other devs at the studio would agree that the content of our game is a big perk around here.

We also have a wonderfully stocked snack bar that has recently been improved to include breakfast items like cereal, oatmeal and grits. I happen to love breakfast very much so this is exciting for me.

Name: Lindsey Jordan
Title: QA analyst
Developer: Xaviant
www.xaviant.com

> ***"Working at Xaviant is exciting. Lichdom will be our first ever game."***

What was your own interview like?
My first interview consisted of breakfast, which I've already mentioned is a favourite of mine, with our chief technology officer Charles Hollingsworth. So I liked Xaviant very much from the start.

I learned a lot about the *Lichdom* development process and the history of Xaviant at breakfast that morning. A few days after the first interview I came into the studio for my second interview with the QA team. Charles gave me a tour of the studio and then we headed into a conference room with the rest of the QA group for the interview. After the team interview we all went out for lunch together and had a more informal chat about my experiences in the industry. This was probably the most comfortable interview I've ever been through.

Describe what the atmosphere is like at your studio?
Working at Xaviant is exciting. *Lichdom* will be our first title and people here are really passionate about it. Our team has pulled together and worked really hard.

SKILLS AND TRAINING

This month: Publishing to PS Vita through PlayStation Mobile

PlayStation First
Sony Computer Entertainment Europe's (SCEE) Academic Development Programme

E: applications@ps-edu.scedev.net
W: www.worldwidestudios.net/about-us/playstation-first

PlayStation First academic development manager Luke Savage (above) wants aspiring devs to get hands on with console platforms like the Vita

SCEE'S LONG-STANDING PlayStation First academic development programme has a heritage stretching back to 1997's Net Yaroze hobbyist development kits.

Back then, $750 was considered an affordable window to making games for the non-professional.

Today, through the PlayStation Mobile initiative, aspiring developers can publish their games to PS Vita without the need even for a dev kit. It's a significant step forward in democratising games development, and particularly important to those studying across the globe.

As PlayStation First's academic development manager, Luke Savage handles licensing SCEE hardware and software to universities, helping students access tools provided for teaching purposes in computer engineering, game technology and design courses. Part of that role involves working with educational establishments to help students get up and running with PSM.

"This is what PlayStation First is all about," says Savage of the PSM programme. "We want to ensure students obtain real games industry know-how with hands-on experience to develop for a cutting edge console platform. PlayStation Mobile provides an incredible entry point to create content on a PlayStation platform and to show us what they can do."

And, asserts Savage, the route from PSM to publishing on PS Vita without the expense of a dev kit is utterly straight forward.

"It's easy; anyone in a registered in a PlayStation Mobile country can sign up as a publisher via our developer site, at psm.playstation.net," conforms Savage.

Those signed up can then take two routes to seeing their game running on Vita – either opting to use Unity for PSM, which provides a free version of Unity, or with SCEE's own PlayStation Mobile software, available to download from the PSM website.

"See this as an open call to action for the next-gen of PlayStation devs," suggests Savage.

"Making PS Vita content through PlayStation Mobile is a great way for young developers to cut their teeth on console development and publish a game on one of PlayStation's exciting consoles," he continues. "It's a ticket to bring your game to PS Vita and learn about PlayStation controls and conventions including PS Vita's unique features."

This all benefits students, says Savage, because it provides them – and their course leaders – an accessible, affordable way to understand, create and publish games to a new generation platform, and a way to familiarise themselves with the Vita framework.

Students signing up to PSM will also receive full support from SCEE through the programme's forum, where fledgling games makers can get direct advice from Sony's experts, and learn from fellow developers.

SCEE clearly benefits from making young developers literate to its platforms and framework, but more than that, it also gets to work with the up and coming stars of tomorrow's games industry.

With people like Savage and Shahid Ahmad keeping an eye on PSM, it is likely to tempt many a course leader and student to consider PSM.

The PlayStation First program is designed to provide students with an accessible, affordable way to create and publish games, says Luke Savage

A SATISFIED CUSTOMER

SONY'S PLAYSTATION MOBILE is already making an impact at universities and colleges all over the world, including the likes of the Netherlands NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, to name just one.

"Many of our students start their learning with PlayStation Mobile," says Brian Beuken, senior lecturer in computer gaming at the university.

"For us, the PS Vita is a fantastic machine to work on. It gives us so many development options and the results often exceed the students' expectations, driving them to be more ambitious and creative with the projects they work on.

"I don't think any other initiative on the market gives such access to development opportunities as PlayStation First."

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Come and hear from a range of speakers who have all been there, done it, got the tee shirt and... lived to tell the tale.

You'll go home with a better understanding of how to access funding, the pros and cons of the different types of funding, as well as the chance to grab a few business cards that might just be the first step to getting financed!

Sessions include:

10 Top Tips for Getting Your Game Funded
David Amor, Picnic Games

Grant Funding for Games Developers
Ed Daly, Tenshi Partners

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Tim Wicksteed, Twice Circled

The State of Crowdfunding for Games
Thomas Bidaux, ICO Partners

Finding the Money
5 people with 10 minutes each to talk about the funding they offer game devs or new ways to keep your business funded
Speakers include:

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Brian Baglow, Creative Skillset

Ella Romanos, Indie

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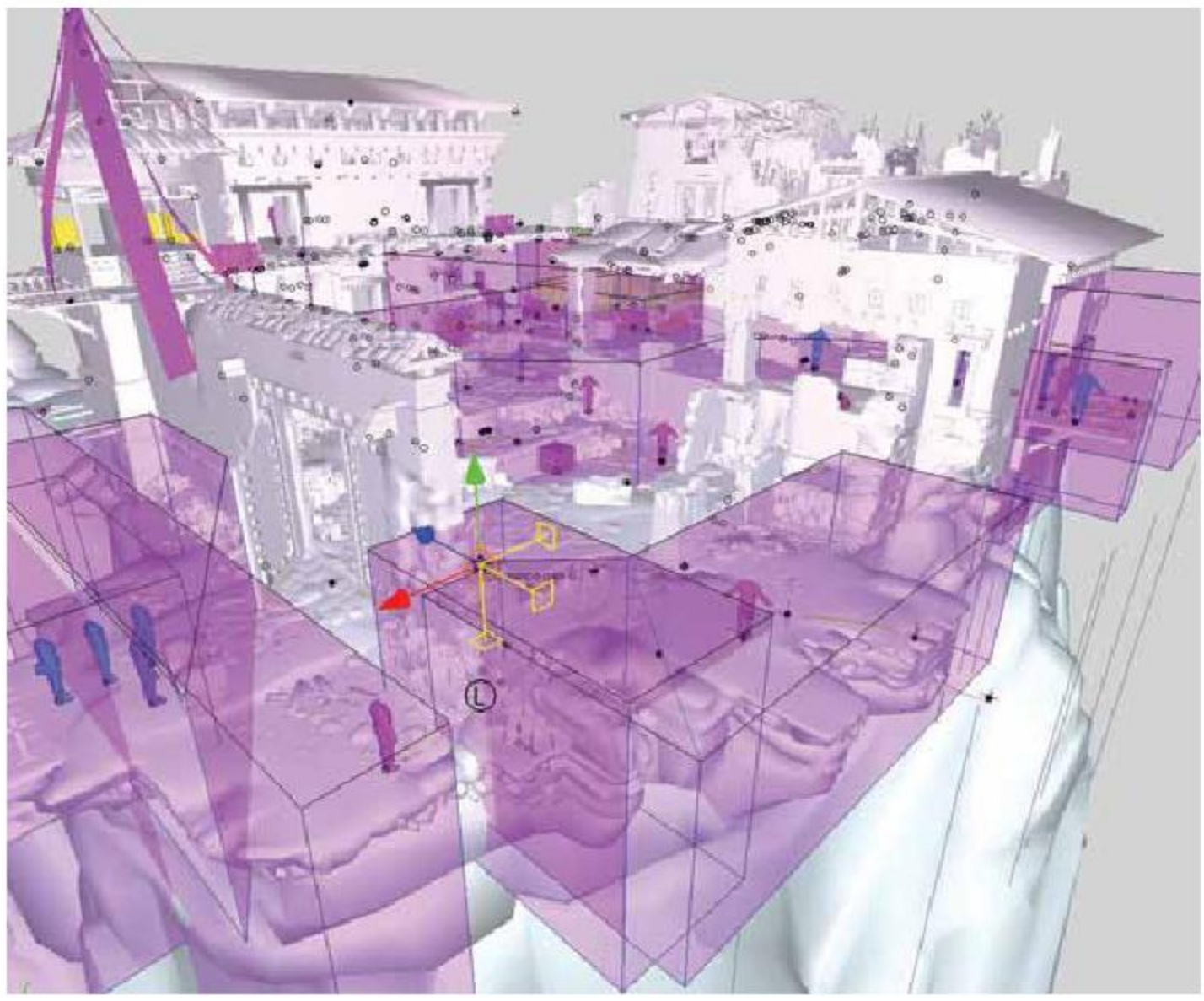


Sharing Sony's tools

Sony Worldwide Studios holds the keys to the tech behind hit games such as The Last of Us and Killzone – and it has made them available to everyone. **James Batchelor** find out why it's opening up its technology

NEW AND SMALLER developers may well gaze at masterpieces like *The Last of Us* and wish they had access to the types of tools used to create such visually rich and well designed games. What they might not know is they already do.

Much of the tech that went into Naughty Dog's epic – and many of Sony's top-selling first-party titles – originates from Sony Worldwide Studios' Authoring Tools Framework.

Currently on version 3.8, ATF is still in active development and is essentially a tool for making tools; a set of C# components that can be used to make anything from integrated developer environments and analysis tools to level and animation editors.

"The framework's many components are designed to be independent and customisable," explains Ron Little, ATF developer for Sony WWS' Tools and Technology group. "Tools programmers can pick just the components they desire, or create and add in their own. There is no platform-specific code in ATF, so it's useful for making tools that target any platform."

And far from being locked away in Sony WWS' offices, only available to the platform holder's in-house studios and closest partners,

Sony WWS' Ron Little (above) says its Authoring Tools Framework (main) could be used for any gaming platform

The level editor has been built to be easy-to-use, and developers are able to view scenes from a variety of different angles (right)

it's actually an open-source project and easily accessible via GitHub.

But why would Sony make such valuable tools available to all and sundry?

"Initially, the reason for going open-source was to make it safer for second parties to adopt ATF," says Little. "Previously, if a games developer lost their contract for developing PlayStation titles, then, without special arrangement, they might lose the right to use their own ATF-based tools.

"This barrier to adopting ATF meant that second parties would often opt to develop their own tools from scratch instead. So in effect, Sony was paying more money than necessary to second parties, to cover the increased cost of tools development."

AUTHORISING DEVELOPMENT

Sony also wants to improve these tools and build a community that shares that goal. Through ongoing testing, feedback and contributions, the company can turn what Little humbly refers to as "just good enough" proprietary tools into superior open-source tech that effectively lower the cost of games development for its users.

He continues: "The director of our large tools group, Ned Lerner, is a big believer in the power of open-source after his great experience working with Apple, Google and others on LLVM, our shared open-source tool chain.

"By releasing as open-source, we've opened the doors to ATF as broadly as possible – there are no regional barriers at all. If a developer in Argentina would like to use ATF, it's just as easy for them to get as for someone in the USA.

"We hope EU/UK games developers will be excited about this release, and we encourage them to dive in. There is a pretty large base of highly creative smaller and indie studios in the UK and the EU, and we hope this will give them a well-deserved boost."

> ***"We've opened the doors to ATF as broadly as possible – there are no regional barriers at all."***
>
> Ron Little, Sony WWS

The Authoring Tools Framework was first created by veteran tools programmer Bill Budge, known for having created 1983 Apple II and Atari 800 title *Pinball Construction Set*.

His work on ATF began almost a decade ago as Sony sought a way to implement regularly used features into Windows-based development tools. Since then, the team has worked with both first-party PlayStation games developers and other tools teams to expand the suite of components.

Examples of how the tech has been used is extensive. Guerilla Games used the framework to form its CoreText sequence editor, while Sony's Santa Monica Studio built its Creature Editor animation blending tool with it.

However, perhaps the most notable product of the ATF is LevelEditor, something that has become a toolset in its own right and also went open-source via GitHub last month.

"Most ATF tools are built by starting with one of the many sample apps that are provided with ATF, and then customising to suit the particular use-case and workflow," says Little.

"One of the earliest and most successful sample apps was LevelEditor. Naughty Dog was the first adopter of LevelEditor and they took it and massively customised it. Charter, as they call it, was used to make their *Uncharted* games and *The Last of Us*."

LEVEL UP

LevelEditor, as you would expect – centres around creating game levels, but it's not just about architechure and scenery. The tool can be used to place enemy characters, destructible items, power-ups, trigger volumes, lights, path-finding waypoints and more. And more features are constantly being added, with recent additions including real-time lighting, multipass materials rendering, terrain editing, and terrain painting.

The toolset is also not specific to PlayStation platforms, instead using a DirectX 11 graphics engine written in native C++ to render things in the design view on Windows. Studios can then use a bridge API to substitute in their own graphics or game engine.

"There are many other more ordinary or 'boring' components that are important to modern GUI tools and that would take months

FURTHER READING

THERE'S PLENTY OF documentation about the Authoring Tools Framework on GitHub – 141 English wiki pages and 31 Japanese ones, in fact.

Sony WWS' Ron Little recommends new studios head there to familiarise themselves with the technology and what it can do – Particularly the 'Getting Started' doc at **bit.ly/1qDT5vX** .

"Check out our sample apps and look for the one that most closely matches the tool you want to build," Little adds.

"Try to understand some key concepts like: Contexts – usually there's one per document, like a selection context or editing context; the DOM, which is like an in-memory XML file, a tree structure where the nodes have attributes; and Adaptability, which is a way to access a DOM node with your own convenient C# class."

You can also find an in-depth list of important components to ATF, either in the software's README file, on our Sony WWS' GitHub project page at **www.github.com/SonyWWS/ATF**.

Finally, you can read more about the studios that have adopted ATF, and what they've done with it, at **bit.ly/1tVA4ma**.

of effort to create from scratch," continues Little. "These components have been widely used. We provide a windows docking framework so that the user can drag around windows and save their GUI layouts and switch between named layouts, both in WinForms and WPF.

"We provide a command service so that users can assign hotkeys to commands. We provide a user settings service, so that all the user settings can be saved, exported, and imported."

ALL AROUND THE WORLD

With the ATF widely available to developers, Sony Worldwide Studios is keen to see studios from around the world – particularly the UK and Europe – embrace the technology and experiment with it, just as PlayStation's first-party studios have.

> ***"We hope to find collaborators to develop a new generation of common games development tools."***
>
> Ron Little, Sony WWS

With the framework not tethered to a single platform, the Authoring Tools Framework has the potential to be one of the go-to destinations for developers seeking to improve the quality of their games, or even define their own development technology.

And the amount of documentation and samples available online, primarily via GitHub, lays the foundation for studios to work with each other and Sony WWS to help evolve the Authoring Tools Framework in the short and long-term future.

"We hope to see cool new tools and new games made using ATF and LevelEditor," says Little. "We hope to continue to receive good feedback. We hope to find trusted collaborators who will co-develop the next set of features for ATF, the next generation of common games tools, and help us all go forward together.

"We want to improve ATF and LevelEditor, and we want to build an open-source community around these and future products. To accomplish these goals, we are actively engaged with the community, and answer questions and address issues raised on the GitHub trackers as fast as we can. We accept pull requests, too. Please join us." ■

Accessible animation

Mixamo aims to make character creation and animation available to all. **Craig Chapple** asks how its latest developments and pricing models can achieve its lofty ambitions through its suite of offerings for developers

By using the Kinect and scanning software such as BodySnap, developers can put their likeness into a game and easily add animations to it

ACCESSIBILITY AND DEMOCRATISATION are the key buzzwords of tools firms in the games industry, perhaps in part started by Unity's mission years ago which has helped make it one of the leading tech companies for devs.

Now Mixamo is championing accessibility, this time in the realm of game animations. The firm has begun changing its entire business model, including its pricing (*see 'The price is right'*), while offering a number of animations from its vast library for free, too.

One of its latest ventures is a new workflow that uses Microsoft's Kinect for Windows V2 to bring 3D character models into its modular character creation toolkit Fuse, which can then be put into the character rigger and have animations added.

Using the Kinect along with scanning software such as Body Labs' free-to-download BodySnap, developers can scan in their own bodies and import them into Fuse, which can then be used to customise the limbs, head and facial features for alterations, as well as add layers of clothing.

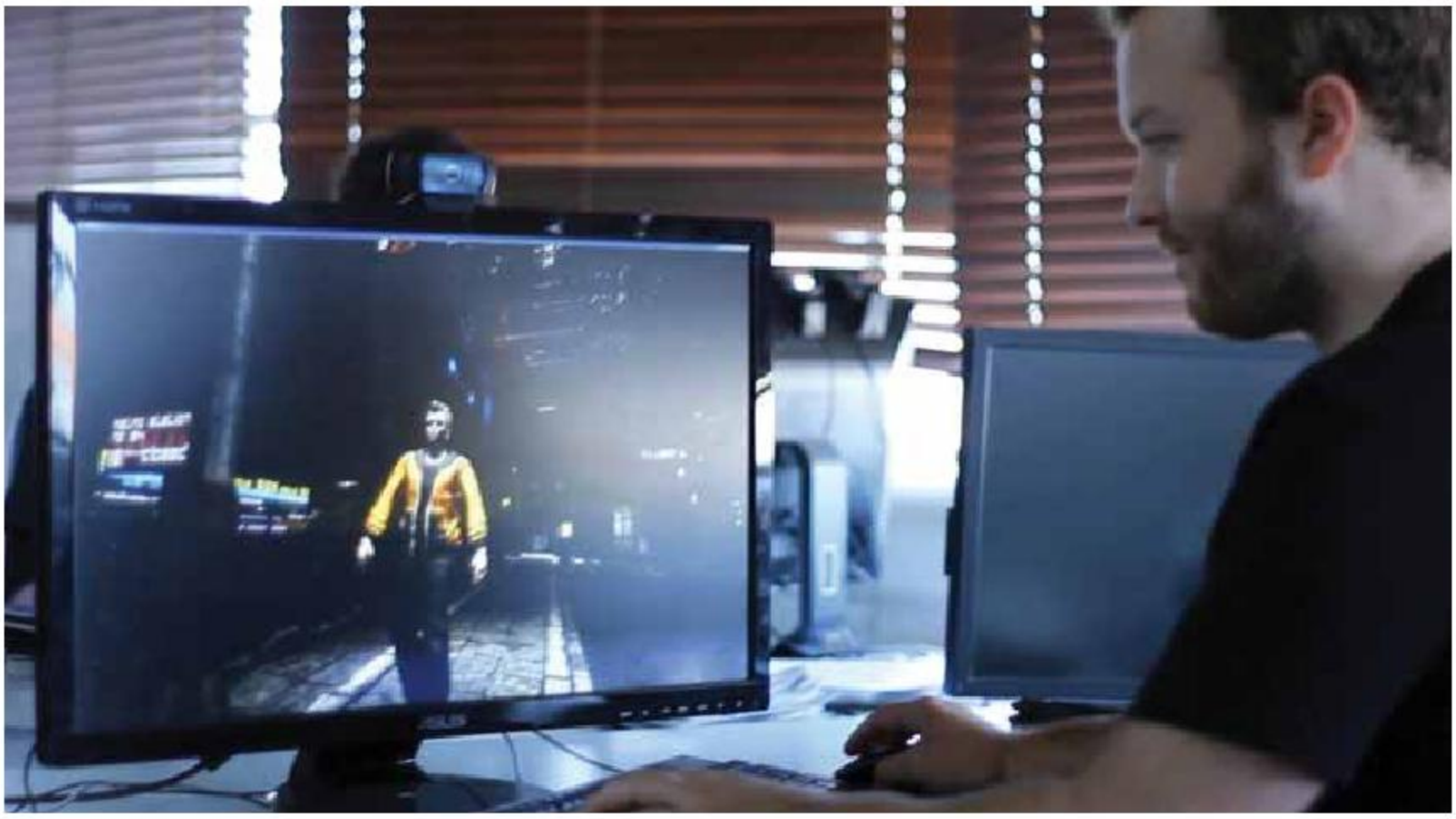
After this, characters can be exported for use in a game engine, such as Unity, Unreal Engine 4 and Source Engine, and is also compatible games such as *Garry's Mod* and *Team Fortress 2*, for those 'prosumers' who may want to take advantage of the tech themselves.

DIGGING INTO RIGGING

Speaking to *Develop*, Mixamo product manager Tyler Georgeson says there are two ways to take a scan of yourself and import that on to a skeleton for use in-game.

"If you do it from Fuse directly, we actually know where all the joints are going to be placed because the UVs are all totally consistent," he explains.

"If you use the standard auto rigger we have available on our website, it uses a machine



Tyler Georgeson (above) puts his likeness into a game scene (left), complete with character customisation and animations from Mixamo's library

learning algorithm that figures out where to place the joints for the skeleton based on volumetric data. So to proximate that with some user input, you just have to put five markers, on the elbows, wrists, chin, groin, knees, and it'll start it up within two minutes."

He adds that for his example model (*pictured left and above*), 280 blend shapes were created.

"All the texturing within Fuse is driven by Substance Designer by Allegorithmic," he explains. "All the clothing and even the skin texturing itself is just one entire sbsar file. Which is great because it's all parametric because you don't need to worry about doing any hand texturing. If you're a developer, that's fantastic."

Going back to that accessibility, Georgeson says this and Mixamo's library can help open up character creation and animation to a plethora of developers, including hobbyists.

The whole process from start to finish of scanning to putting a new character model in-game based on the person scanned can take just a matter of hours.

QUICK AND EASY

Georgeson says his character was uploaded directly to Fuse, and he was animating it within a couple of minutes. From here, he was able to update it to include 50 facial blendshapes, which could take days to a week to generate otherwise.

"With BodyLabs it took about an hour for them to generate the model on their cloud-based service," says Georgeson, explaining the entire process from scan to importing it to the game. "Once you download the obj file and you drop it into Fuse, and it takes about 30 seconds to import.

"Then you can push and pull as much as you want within Fuse, put on textures, light clothing, hair, beard, whatever you want to do, upload to Mixamo, which will take another two minutes. If you want a rig, you can buy animations or you can just download the T pose, that will take 30 seconds. Then wait for Unity to start up, and just drop it in there. And it's easy enough for me to just drop it in the assets, then drop it in my game hierarchy. Then if I want it in my game, fire up an animation controller within Unity and away you go."

> ***"I want Mixamo to be accessible at all levels. If we can grow a large community, that's all the better."***
>
> Tyler Georgeson, Mixamo

Art producer Brent Jentzsch says this process shows that Fuse has flexibility beyond just pre-set characters, and can be used to play around with your own assets. And with use of Mixamo plug-ins such as Face Plus, characters with full animations can be made even quicker than ever.

"Whether it's something you've scanned yourself or whether it's a character you're creating on your own, but you want to use Fuse for the customisations, being able to push and pull body parts, all the different clothing, that real-time texturing you get inside of there, that really speeds up the process.

"Plus one of the great things we've also added to Fuse is you can export your characters after you rig it on the Mixamo site, when you export your character, you can get the facial blend shapes you need for the facial animation and for use with our Face Plus plug-in."

For those interested in dropping characters into games such as *Garry's Mod* or Steam tools such as Source Filmmaker, Georgeson admits it can take some extra work as Source uses its own proprietary mode formats, but anticipates this could change in future with the rumoured release of Source Engine 2.

"In their new model viewer they support not just dmx and mdl files, which are their own proprietary formats, but also obj and fbx, and those are industry standard, and that's where the real bottleneck is in getting into the Source engine," he says.

"So if Source 2 is coming soon, and fbx works directly in it, that's icing on the cake."

DEMOCRATISING ANIMATION

Georgeson hopes with such tools and methods, as well as Mixamo's existing library of pre-built animations, that the firm will find a large audience and continue to build its community for the benefit of everyone.

He highlights the fact that developers are writing tools guides for others within the community and sharing general knowledge about animating and rigging.

"What I want from Mixamo is to be accessible at all levels. If we can grow a large-base community that's all the better for everybody," he states.

"It helps guide our development because we get a lot of good feedback, and if we can create tools that are useful at every level, for the hobbyist, indie developer or the pro studio, everybody wins." ■

THE PRICE IS RIGHT

IN AN EFFORT TO increase accessibility to its suite of animation services, Mixamo recently launched a new pricing strategy to appeal to individual animators, indies and larger studios alike.

The new model includes pay-per-use for animations and auto-rigging sessions, as well as three pricing tiers targeting a variety of developers.

Starter – $25 per month or $250 per year
Aimed at beginners and new users, subscribers will get five animations per month and access to Fuse Basic, with unlimited auto-rigging of Fuse characters.

Indie – $50 per month or $500 per year
Animators will get ten animations per month, access to Fuse, unlimited auto-rigging of Fuse characters and full access to Face Plus and Mixamo's level of detail services Decimator and Skeleton.

All Access – $150 per month or $1,500 per year
Subscribers in this tier will have access to 50 animations per month, plus everything in the previous tiers. Those who sign up for the annual fee will have unlimited access to animations.

Going mobile

Smartphones and tablets are arguably the most popular platforms in the UK right now for developers. **Craig Chapple** rounds up a host of key tools to ensure you can get the most out of your game

PROJECT ANARCHY

Company: Havok
www.projectanarchy.com

PROJECT ANARCHY IS Havok's end-to-end game engine built mainly for mobile devices, and what's more, it comes with a free licence for shipping games on iOS, Android and Tizen.

The tool suite features the Havok Vision Engine and development tools including Physics, Animation Studio and AI. New updates include adding FBX files as assets to the asset manager, automatic script validation, particle lighting support for PC and mobile and improved integration for Scaleform and FMOD.

UNREAL ENGINE 4

Company: Epic Games
www.unrealengine.com

EPIC GAMES HAS been keen to show off Unreal Engine 4 as not just a powerful engine for new-gen consoles and PC, but also as high-end tech. The stunning *Rivalry* demo (*pictured*) was originally built for a DirectX 11-class PC, but was run on the new Nvidia Tegra K1 mobile processor.

The firm's latest engine can also be used for less graphics-intensive applications too, as shown with the free *Tappy Chicken* game, based on the simple yet popular *Flappy Bird* by Dong Nguyen.

UNITY

Company: Unity Technologies
www.unity3d.com

UNITY'S OFFERINGS ARE well known, from its animation tech Mecanim to its new suite of 2D tools. The firm has also been busy expanding its offerings, with the acquisition of Tsugi bringing with it a new cloud-based development service, which will work with another Unity purchase, predictive analytics outfit Playnomics.

Rather than just a simple engine, Unity now offers an increasing selection of services making it a near one-stop shop for all your games development needs.

APP GAME KIT

Company: The Game Creators
www.appgamekit.com

THE GAME CREATORS' App Game Kit is built to enable developers to program their game once, and deploy it across the myriad of mobile devices on the market today.

The tool comes with its own BASIC script language making the engine easy to use for both experienced and amateur developers, though users can also code in C++ if they wish.

App Game Kit 2, which raised £33,026 on Kickstarter, is still in alpha, and is currently being prepped for a Steam Greenlight campaign.

CORONA SDK

Company: Corona Labs
www.coronalabs.com

CROSS-PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT toolkit Corona SDK is used by more than 300,000 developers to build 2D games and apps for mobile.

The firm offers an extensive library of over 500 APIs, enabling features from animation to networking. The platform is built on the likes of OpenGL, OpenAL, Box2D, Facebook, SQLite, and uses the Lua coding language for development.

The Basic version of the SDK is available for $16 a month, while the Pro version costs $49 a month.

MARMALADE

Company: Marmalade
www.madewithmarmalade.com

MARMALADE'S SUITE OF tools covers much of the games development and porting processes.

Now available for free, developers can use the SDK to code in C++, while users also have access to its other tools, such as Juice, which helps simplify the porting of iOS apps and games to Android.

Marmalade Quick, meanwhile, is designed for app development using Lua, and Marmalade Web supports the creation of hybrid apps, using HTML5, CSS and JavaScript.

WWISE

Company: Audiokinetic
www.audiokinetic.com

WWISE IS ONE of the leading audio tools in the industry, used by the likes of PopCap to mix unique sounds. It can be integrated into development tech such as Unity, Unreal Engine 4 and Marmalade.

Numerous plug-ins are also available for Wwise to meet the unique needs of sound designers, including Convolution, which lets users create reverberation based on samples of real acoustical spaces, and SoundSeed, a family of interactive sound generators.

FMOD

Company: Firelight Technologies
www.fmod.org

THOUGH KNOWN FOR use in triple-A console games, including Xbox One launch title *Forza Motorsport 5*, FMOD Studio is proving increasingly popular with iOS and Android developers.

The recent release of FMOD Studio 1.4 features profiler enhancements for live game output recording, and was updated to boost mixing and decoding performance by up to 30 per cent.

Earlier this year, the tool suite was made available at no cost to devs with game budgets under $100,000.

NEXTPEER

Company: NextPeer
www.nextpeer.com

MULTIPLAYER SOCIAL SDK NextPeer is designed to solve the issue of multiplayer gaming on mobile, supporting synchronous and asynchronous gameplay.

The firm aims to help games developers increase player engagement and retention through supporting real-time interactions, live rankings and a delayed synchronous technology that lets users play against past sessions of other players to maintain a game's competitive edge.

The tool supports Android and iOS on native, Unity and Cocos2d-X, and is used in thousands of mobile titles such as *Demons and Dungeons*, *Tippy Tap* and *2048*.

UPSIGHT

Company: Upsight
www.upsight.com

UPSIGHT IS AN analytics and marketing toolset, the result of the merger of PlayHaven and Kontagent.

The suite offers access to core acquisition, engagement and revenue metrics, unlimited data storage and options for mining out specific data based on player behaviour.

Developers can sign up to a free account, which supports up to 250,000 push notifications to users per month. Other tiers, from Core and Pro to Enterprise, are also available, starting at $500 a month and rising depending on usage.

The Lite version is available for free to developers with less than 500,000 monthly average users.

DELTADNA

Company: DeltaDNA
www.deltadna.com

DELTADNA IS THE new name for the company behind GamesAnalytics. The firm offers a suite of data mining, A/B testing and 3D segmentation tools that have been used by the likes of Sony, Sega and Ubisoft.

It claims its SDK can be integrated into a game within two minutes, and allows developers to create and collect events as well as access various data mining and personalisation tools within the platform.

The Lite version is available free for use with games under 500,000 monthly average users, with fees applicable to the on-demand version from $600 per month, depending on the number of players.

POWERVR GRAPHICS SDK

Company: Imagination Technologies
www.community.imgtec.com/developers/powervr

IMAGINATION'S POWERVR GRAPHICS SDK offers a framework made up of PVRSHell, which helps streamline the process of writing cross-platform graphics applications, and PVRTools, a tools library containing the most commonly used funationality in a 3D graphics application.

The tool can be used to render simple shapes to complex scenes that feature numerous objects, animations and shader effects. To help devs get to grips with the tool, the SDK contains various manuals, whitepapers and training materials.

The SDK, which supports iOS and Android, is available for free.

ARM MALI GPU SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

Company: ARM
www.malideveloper.arm.com

ARM ACTUALLY OFFERS numerous tools compatible with its ARM Mali GPU, designed to squeeze every last bit of power out of mobile devices using its tech.

Development tools available include the Mali GPU Texture Compression Tool to compress individual textures, the Mali Graphics debugger, an OpenGL ES 3.0 emulator, a shader library and Mali GPU User Interface Engine.

Software development kits are also available for Android and Linux, offering a collection of resources for building OpenGL ES 2.0 applications on Mali platforms.

COCOONJS

Company: Ludei
www.ludei.com

COCOONJS LETS DEVELOPERS test, deploy and monetise their HTML5 games across all mobile platforms.

The cloud compiler allows users to select and configure their title to various different platforms to ensure their app runs on all target platforms.

CocoonJS's testing and debugging tools also make sure developers know their games will run smoothly on different hardware, while It also supports in-app purchases and user engagement APIs.

On top of this, the tool offers a built-in analytics service to measure player activity, while developers can increase user engagement by sending local and remote push notifications.

HAXE

Company: Haxe Foundation
www.haxe.org

SUPPORTING BOTH IOS and Android, Haxe is an open-source, multi-platform programming language.

The toolkit features the Haxe programming language, which its creators say is easy to learn for those already familiar with either Java, C++, PHP or AS3, and is designed to allow efficient cross-platform development.

The programming language is used by the Haxe compiler to produce cross-platform native code, and can compile thousands of classes in seconds. Also included in the toolkit is the Haxe standard library, providing a common set of APIs and further frameworks that can be used to develop additional tools.

LIBGDX

Company: Mario Zechner
www.libgdx.badlogicgames.com

AN OPEN-SOURCE tool licensed under Apache 2.0, libGDX is a Java games development framework that enables users to create 2D and 3D games that can then be deployed across a plethora of mobile platforms via a unified API.

As well as letting developers test and debug their games, numerous tools and APIs are available to support games development. Useful tools, complete with Github pages, include a particle editor, texture packer and bitmap font generator Hiero.

Libgdx can also be integrated into third-party tools including 2D skeletal animation tool Spine and multiplayer social SDK Nextpeer, to name a few.

KEY RELEASE

A brush with fine art

We consider Substance Painter's move on reinventing the way artists work with 3D game assets

TEXTURING AND COMPRESSION is the foundation on which Allegorithmic built much of its reputation in the industry. But with its new release, Substance Painter, it is offering something a little different.

In essence, Painter strives to deliver an artist-orientated, physically-based toolset for working on game assets. It does so with a view to compliment physically-based rendering, and focuses on working with what the company is calling a 'material mindset', through the likes of dynamic weathering and particle painting.

And after several years in development at Allegorithmic, it's now ready for release.

"There was a clear need for a 3D painting application dedicated to game assets," says president and founder Sebastien Deguy. "Traditional pipelines using Photoshop started to hit walls with the rise of physically-based rendering – the perfect time to revamp the texturing pipeline.

"So we dug up an old idea we had of using a particle system to drive texture alterations and map generation. We knew that we had the tech and expertise to build something unique and we were just waiting for the right time to execute."

The result of that effort – along with input from users granted Early Access through Steam – is a tool that enables the application of water stains, erosion, grease streaks and other natural weathering to models' textures through simulation, rather through painstaking and time-consuming traditional painting.

"PBR, multi-channel painting and a non-destructive workflow are the foundation upon which Substance Painter was built," confirms Deguy.

"As the demand for next-gen content shifts toward physically-based, Substance Painter will be there to provide full material painting, physical simulation through particle brushes, a true non-destructive workflow and more."

MODUS OPERANDI BRUSH SAGA

The idea is that Painter will emerge as a standard for authoring physically-based content, saving time by letting artists paint on a flexible range of texture effects such as rain, laser impacts or even heat, with full control over parameters around qualities such as effect ferocity. Artists are also able to dictate myriad effects like glare, colour correction and tone mapping.

And, adds Deguy, there's been an effort make the toolset familiar to those that have mastered existing art tools.

"Substance Painter has adopted and enhanced common workflows found in popular applications such as Photoshop and ZBrush," he says. "The goal was to help users get up and running quickly.

"Soon, we'll also have the ability to export not only images, but also PSD file and Substance file to streamline the process with Substance Designer and any game engine or DCC application supporting Substance engine."

And, as with most modern middleware trying to serve an ever more diverse games industry, Painter promises to suit a broad range of studios, partly in response to engines' need to do the same.

"Substance Painter is definitely suited for a broad range of use," states Deguy. "High-end game engines such as Unreal and CryEngine that were once only available for triple-A studios are now finding their way into the hands of independent teams.

Both UE4 and Unity 5 will further push PBR as the mainstream workflow, and PBR in Painter provides triple-A studios the workflow they need for proprietary engines with custom shader support and artist-focused material painting. At the same time, Painter provides smaller, independent teams an easy and efficient toolset for authoring physically-based content for UE4 and Unity 5, as well."

With the final release imminent, a number of licenses will be available, from an indie version and pro offering for studios generating more than $10,000 a year, to floating licenses and site licenses. And those curious can also test the water with a free 30-day trial.

Substance Painter
What is it: An artist-orientated middleware that harnesses and compliments the rise of physically-based rendering, providing a series of efficiency-focused tools for 'painting on' effects to assets.

Company: Allegorithmic
www.allegorithmic.com/products/substance-painter

Allegorithmic boss Sebastien Deguy says Painter has been designed to become the standard choice for creating physically-based content

HEARD ABOUT

Life after Rockstar-dom

John Broomhall talks to Will Morton and Craig Conner, two time-served audio veterans of Grand Theft Auto creator Rockstar Games, as they contemplate pastures new with their own venture Solid Audioworks

RED DEAD REDEMPTION, *L.A. Noire, Max Payne 3, Manhunt, Grand Theft Auto*. Can an audio CV look any better?

Between them, Craig Conner and Will Morton have devoted more than 30 years to creating music, sound and audio content for Rockstar. As they embark on a new production partnership, they reflect on working for the world's most famed developer.

"I've gained an incredible amount of experience over the last two decades," says Conner. "Working on large projects like *GTA* is certainly made easier by the fact I'm obsessed with sound – and as well having an eye for detail you also have to see the bigger picture.

"I'd bet that on a lot of projects it's the audio team who know most about the game as a whole. If you have to put sound to something, you need to know everything that's in the game. Working at Rockstar wasn't just a career, it was a way of life."

Morton concurs: "I learned a hell of a lot at Rockstar – it's really true that if you work with good people, you'll learn good habits. There's never any room for complacency, always something new to learn, and as technology changes constantly, our skills develop, too.

"Things that people probably don't think of as being important when starting out are organisation skills and discipline, especially when working with vast amounts of assets. Being a bit of a perfectionist helps, but hitting deadlines while you're doing the impossible, with hundreds of thousands of assets, across different time zones and multiple locations, is a skill you really don't think you'll need when you're studying sound production at college.

"There's no way we would have been able to do what we did with the *GTA* series' audio without precise planning and organisation. Latterly, managing dialogue became my sole responsibility. To get a sense of the scope, consider how the dialogue requirements grew. For instance *GTA IV* had about 80,000 lines of in-game dialogue, but *GTA V* – on the same hardware – had over 150,000."

> ***"I'd bet that on a lot of projects it's the audio team who know most about the game as a whole."***
>
> Craig Conner, Solid Audioworks

LEAVING ROCKSTAR

For Conner, the highlights of his Rockstar tenure have been working with "some of the best people in the industry, pushing the boundaries in game audio and making the impossible, possible". Meanwhile Morton is immensely proud of what was achieved.

"It was fantastic to work with such an enthusiastic team – amazing talent in such high concentration, with everybody on the same page focused on the same goal," he says. "People would be blown away by what another department had done and it just gave everyone the thirst to push themselves and the game further."

It's the duo's firm intention to bring the same skills and attitude to their new venture, Solid Audioworks – a production company offering a full audio service, including score, dialogue, sound effects and movie post.

"Leaving Rockstar was about being able to work from my own studio and be closer to my wife and daughter, but also to expand my horizons in terms of the projects I worked on," Morton explains. "There are a lot of interesting games being developed out there – especially indie games, as well as triple-A – and I wanted to try something different, though it wasn't a decision I made lightly."

The idea for the new firm began when Morton, while doing film sound work, learned Conner was involved in the same project.

Morton adds: "Whilst a change is as good as a rest, and it's been great to work on films, we're very much looking forward to getting back into game audio." ■

Audio experts Will Morton (above left) and Craig Conner (above) will apply all they learned from working on titles like Grand Theft Auto V (below left) at their new company Solid Audioworks

John Broomhall is a game audio specialist creating and directing music, sound and dialogue. Find him at: **www.johnbroomhall.co.uk**

UNREAL DIARIES

Stores and schools

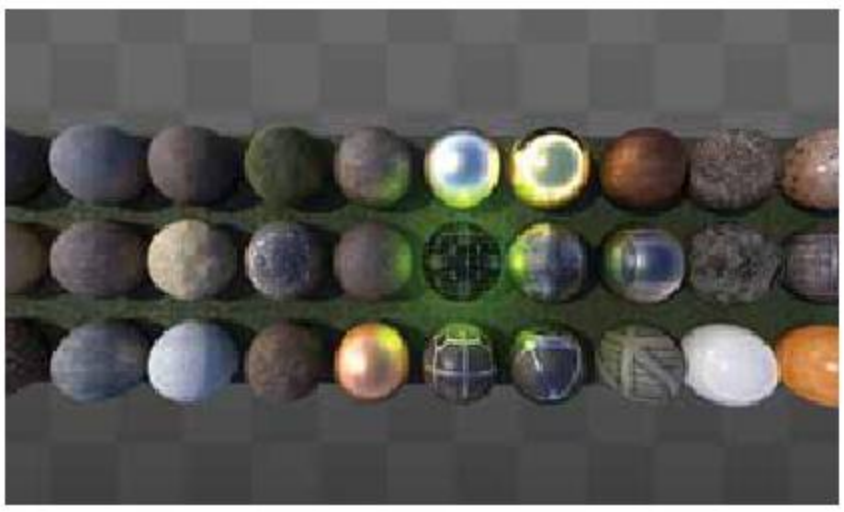
Epic Games launches Unreal Engine Marketplace and makes UE4 free for schools and universities

The new Unreal Engine Marketplace means developers can pick up a host of ready-made asset packs for their game, such as the cartoon-style foliage above or the textures below

THE UNREAL ENGINE Marketplace is officially open for business, which means Unreal Engine 4 developers can now buy and sell premium user-created content for use in their projects.

In addition to all of Epic's free releases, the new Unreal Engine Marketplace offers a variety of asset packs including environments, props, characters, sounds, materials, animated meshes and a host of other items.

"What you see today on the new Marketplace is only the beginning," says Deke Waters, Epic's senior engine producer. "We'll continue to add our own Epic-created content, such as complete projects, showcases, demos and tutorials that developers can use for learning and for their own projects."



Epic has published a Marketplace Trello board where the community can vote for candidates that are through the initial triage phase. This, along with the Marketplace submissions form, is easily discoverable through the new forum where developers can make requests for desired items and discuss their work.

FEES WAIVED FOR ACADEMIA

While financial transactions are new to the Marketplace, they're now a thing of the past for educators. Epic has made Unreal Engine 4 free to schools and universities in its latest move to support students and teachers, and to help companies that licence the engine to find and hire qualified developers.

Under Epic's academic initiative, Unreal Engine 4 can be installed and used on all school-owned computers, and personal copies are provided free of charge to students enrolled in video games development, computer science, art, architecture, simulation and visualisation programmes at any educational institution.

"Nothing is stopping students from honing the skills needed to enter the range of fields using Unreal Engine technology, from entertainment software and film to visualisation, healthcare simulation and military training," adds Unreal Engine general manager Ray Davis. "Students who know Unreal Engine technology have a huge advantage when it comes to job placement."

As with the subscriber version, schools and their students receive access to the engine's entire C++ source code, Blueprint visual scripting system, regular updates and so forth.

Students retain indefinite access to any versions of the engine used during their coursework which gives them the option to turn their class projects into shipping projects at any time. Games launched commercially are subject to the standard five per cent royalty after €3,000 in revenue per game per quarter.

Schools and universities can access UE4 at **www.unrealengine.com/education**.

UPCOMING EPIC ATTENDED EVENTS

IndieCade
October 9th to 12th
Culver City, California

Brasil Game Show
October 8th to 12th
Sao Paulo, Brazil

Montreal International Game Summit
November 10th to 11th
Montreal, Quebec

*Email **licensing@epicgames.com** for appointments and sign up for Epic's newsletter at unrealengine.com.*

Epic is hiring. To find out more visit: **epicgames.com/careers**

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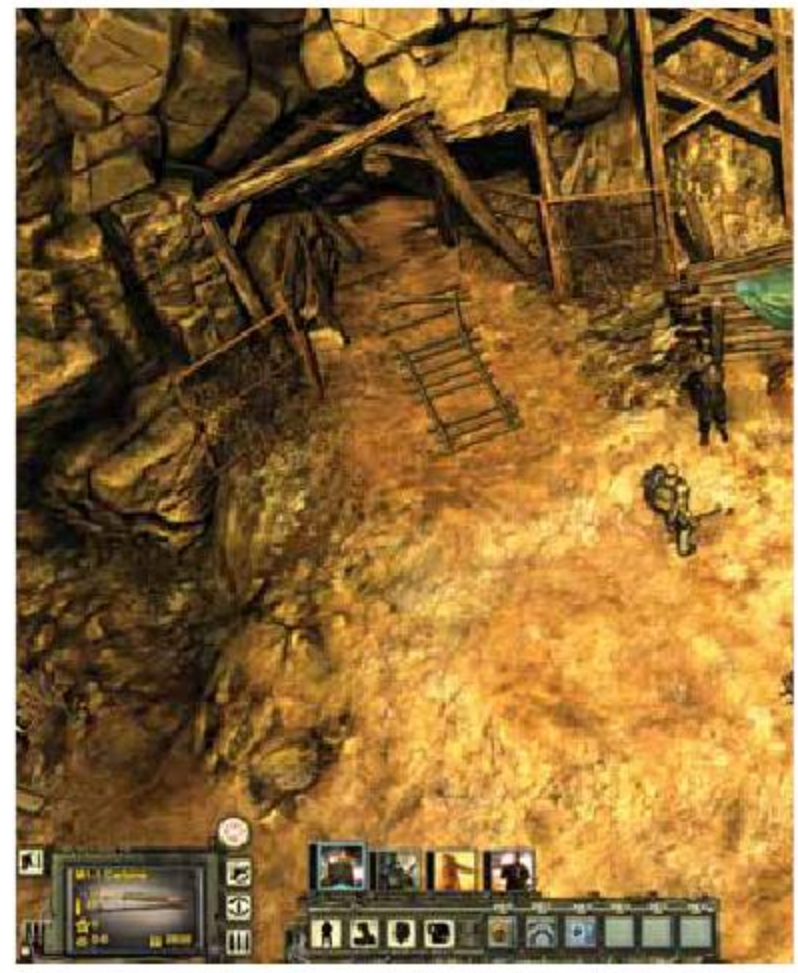

UNITY FOCUS

Bringing life to the Wasteland

inXile Entertainment's Chris Keenan discusses how his team broke new ground for Unity

InXile's Chris Keenan says the Unity Asset Store proved a great place to purchase ready-made assets so the Wasteland 2 team could hit the ground running on development

WASTELAND 2, THE long-awaited sequel to the game that inspired the *Fallout* series, is one of the most high-profile examples of Kickstarter success. With the game now finally available, we spoke to developer inXile Entertainment to find out more about the tech behind this hotly-anticipated title.

Given the size and scope of the game, the most crucial decision was which engine the team would use. In fact, project lead Chris Keenan says this was the first step after the Kickstarter campaign reached its target – and he says it came down to two choices.

"After some initial examination, we narrowed it down to Unreal and Unity," he says. "InXile had used Unreal for many years prior, but we also had a quarter of the team size we did during that period. While you can do some amazing things with Unreal, we felt that it would have been overkill.

"At the time, there weren't any large PC games being developed on Unity so there was a bit of risk, but after a tech evaluation, we felt it would hold up to what our team threw at it."

ASSET BONANZA

One of the things that swung the decision was Unity's Asset Store, which Keenan says gave the team a huge advantage: "We could hit the ground running, purchasing assets in bulk that would allow our team to start prototyping immediately. We're a very iterative company so getting features into code and testing them out was our number one objective."

The store also helped inXile get their many enthusiastic backers involved. Working with the team at Unity, the studio experimented with crowd-sourced assets.

"We created a style guide, posted it up on our website and had some members of the team working with the community for those who wanted to contribute assets to the game," explains Keenan. "The community got to keep the rights to their work, got a credit in the game, we would pay them for their creation, and they could sell it on.

> ***"Technology has changed to the point where there are many ways to interact with the crowd."***
>
> Chris Keenan, InXile

Keenan urges new Unity devs to explore the store rather than spending pre-production time on making their own assets – in fact, inXile saved $200,000 in its first few months by doing so.

But *Wasteland 2*'s development wasn't entirely dependent on art and visual assets. To hold true to the original game and its legacy, the team knew the written word was just as important.

"Even in some of the most amazing looking games, there are still elements the player won't be able to experience without that textual world description describing all of the senses," says Keenan. "We knew we weren't going to have 50 artists on the project and wanted to use text to fill out the world as much as possible.

"Another focus of ours was with the UI. Games that came from the Infinity Engine and the early *Fallout* games had a very specific look to the UI. We knew we could achieve this while improving the user experience as many modern games do."

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Keenan's final advice is for new devs to look for support from the hordes of established Unity users already out there.

"Google will be your best friend," he says. "Many other developers have likely faced the same problems you're having. There is almost always a post somewhere about the exact same problem.

"Overall, the best piece of advice is to try not to be too closed off in your development. Technology has changed to the point where there are many ways to interact with the crowd that weren't possible before. The development of *Wasteland 2* has undeniably been better off for it." ■

Wasteland 2
Developer: inXile Entertainment
Platform: Mac/PC
www.wasteland.inxile-entertainment.com

MADE WITH MARMALADE

Close to the Metal

The middleware firm's Tony Waters ponders the opportunities presented by Apple's new graphics API

FORGET THE INEVITABLE iPhone 6, the accompanying iPhone 6 Plus and the questionable rise of the word 'phablets' – the big news for games developers was the unveiling of the Metal graphics API back in June.

Designed to allow studios to squeeze more visual power out of iOS 8 without increasing the processing cost, Metal marks the next step for mobile developers hoping to create high-quality games for smartphones and tablets.

BOOSTING PERFORMANCE

"With Metal, Apple has created a thin API targeted specifically for the Apple A7 and A8 GPUs, allowing developers to make better use of the GPU processing power," explains Tony Waters, Marmalade's head of SDK.

"Metal has been designed to provide a reduced overhead between CPU and GPU, more predictable performance and better programmability. This enables developers to shift more processing onto the GPU and reduce the load on the CPU for each draw call. Ultimately this comes down to more draw calls per frame – potentially ten times more – this means more unique objects and more visual variety.

"Also, there's a nice side effect that reduced CPU load on draw calls means there's more CPU time available which could allow for more complex physics and AI, for example."

Far from Metal being a response to core gamers calling for more graphically impressive mobile games, Waters instead argues it actually satisfies developer demands instead.

"Games designers are incredibly creative," he says. "Often the challenge with app development is trying to realise the vision within the constraints of the platform. It's a balancing act between the quality and quantity of the graphics assets used and ensuring the frame rate and responsiveness is high enough.

"A lot of effort is arguably spent scaling down the ambition of artists and designers – reducing the polys on models or taking background objects out of a scene, all to ensure the frame rate is high enough. More powerful GPUs and new APIs like Metal allow developers to create games closer to how they were imagined to be."

Naturally, Marmalade is preparing to add support for Metal into its products as soon as possible. In fact, the firm's Extension Development Kit already allows studios to use any new platform API on their current projects without waiting for an update to the main Marmalade SDK.

INTO THE CORE

"We also plan to update our cross-platform graphics APIs to provide developers the performance gains on iOS without requiring them to write iOS specific code," says Waters.

"One of Marmalade's core strengths is performance, so it's important to us that our developers are able to exploit any new technology that helps them get the very best out of the hardware." ■

Why Marmalade matters:
Marmalade's Extension Development Kit allows devs to utilise Metal API – or any other new platform API – before full support is added into the firm's main SDK at a later date.
www.madewithmarmalade.com

Marmalade head of SDK Tony Waters (above) says the firm is adding support to the Metal API for iOS devices to its tool suite

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SERVICES SPOTLIGHT

This month: **Sperasoft**

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SPERASOFT OFFERS A variety of services in games development, from art, engineering to technology infrastructure support. Recently, the firm expanded its operations to cover full SKU and co-development services.

Formed in 2004, it has worked with big names on titles including *FIFA*, *Dragon Age* and *BattleCry*. Supported platforms include PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, PC, iOS and Android.

> ***Sperasoft offers more capacity to port existing and back catalogue games to additional platforms.***
>
> Igor Efremov, Sperasoft

Sperasoft CEO Igor Efremov (right) says the services firm feels more like a studio

Speaking to *Develop*, Sperasoft CEO Igor Efremov (*pictured below*), says despite being a services company and not creating its own IP, the firm is run "like a full-fledged games studio".

"We are a team of people who are passionate about games and who partner with our clients as an extension of their team versus providing just bodies for work tasks," he says.

"One of the first things many of our clients note when they visit our studio is the atmosphere, it feels like home; it feels like a games development studio."

Efremov adds that its recent expansion into full development is a result of the combination of skills the firm already offers, and was a natural evolution for the business to take.

"We have built a power house team who have collectively worked decades in the industry," he says.

"Sure, we can get you killer art, engineering, and services; however, we are uniquely positioned to combine those disciplines to offer an even higher value-add."

But why should developers outsource work rather than keeping everything in-house? Efremov says while outsourcing used to be about saving costs, in the modern games industry it can be used as a way of augmenting staff and expertise.

"Serious games development is a big global business, demand for great talent is high," he explains.

"Sperasoft is located in a city with some of the top art and engineering schools in the world; why not access that talent?

"In addition to these benefits, Sperasoft gives developers more capacity to port existing and back catalogue games to additional platforms without needing to build separate development teams."

As well as its range of current offerings aimed at supporting the core development process, in future Sperasoft may offer services related to data, security and back-office systems.

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TOOLS SPOTLIGHT

This month: **Granny 3D**

GRANNY 3D IS an animation runtime and toolchain solution developed by middleware experts Rad Game Tools.

The runtime component is cross-platform and comes with source code available to licensees. The toolchain, meanwhile, features a complete exporter pipeline for Max, Maya and XSI. Granny 3D also houses the Animation Studio, a state tree editor that allows developers to composite and sequence animations.

The tool has been used in numerous high-profile games, including the recently released *Destiny*, *Eve Online*, *Forza Horizon 2*, and is set to be used in *Halo 5*.

To ensure the big studios continue harnessing Granny, Rad has updated the tool with added Positional IK for IK targets such as eyes, and has integrated skeleton rendering, in addition to mesh rendering.

"We beefed up the animation binding so you can unbind specific animation spots, or even automatically re-bind all animations with a single button click," explains Granny 3D lead developer Aaron Pfeiffer (*pictured left*) of the latest features to the tool.

"We added a Lua interface for the key/value pairs that are stored on nodes in the graph, so you can store your own data there. There also is now a 64-bit version of the Animation Viewer."

The next release of Animation Studio, which Pfeiffer says should be out in the near future, will update the tool with new features such as the ability to mark transitions as interruptible, and allow animation states and state machines to accept a transition from any other state, cutting down the number of transitions animators need to manually specify.

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THE FAQ PAGE: JONATHAN SMITH

Develop grills respected figures from the global games industry

Jonathan Smith has worked on numerous titles throughout his career, from Operation Flashpoint (far right), to LEGO Star Wars (right)

Who are you and what do you do?
I'm Jonathan Smith, strategic director at TT Games.

What are you working on right now?
As I have done for the past ten years or so: exciting new *LEGO* games.

What was the first game or product that you ever worked on in the industry?
Starting at Codemasters, I was lucky enough to be able to work with the fantastic team at Bohemia Interactive on the original *Operation Flashpoint*. Insta-death hilarity.

> ***"I was lucky enough to work with Bohemia on Operation Flashpoint. Insta-death hilarity."***

What was the first game you ever played, and did you enjoy it?
Asteroids In Space: flicker-scrolling lines of asterisks on a ZX81, typed in from a Melbourne House listing. Having the power to control what appeared on the telly was nothing short of magic.

What was the most recent game you played, and did you enjoy it?
I played about three hours of *Civ 5* last night. It's more a tool for self-hypnosis than anything.

What is your favourite game ever, and for what reason?
LEGO Star Wars. Because *LEGO Star Wars*.

How many hours a week do you spend playing games?
Not as much as before, but enough to keep up.

What area of the games industry needs more 'investment'?
Education. Always education.

What do you enjoy about the games industry today?
People and possibilities.

What disappoints you about the video games industry today?
When players aren't shown the respect that they deserve.

Of all the games you have worked on, which has been your favourite to work on?
We had the best time on *LEGO Star Wars II*, working on the classic trilogy at the same time as the first game was growing into a success far beyond our original expectations.

What game that you weren't involved with would you most liked to have worked on?
Guitar Hero. Man, that's a game.

What other video games developer do you most admire?
Anyone who gets the job done with style.

What hobbies, collections or interests do you have that are completely unrelated to video games?
Everything is related to video games.

What is your favourite book, movie, TV show and album of all time?
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